

下卷

Bad End of Night

バッド・エンド・オブ・ナイト

著／ひとしずくP
ILLUST／鈴ノ助

Bad∞End∞Night: Volume 2

by Hitoshizuku-P

Illustrations by Suzunosuke

Translation by vgpersion

Table of Contents

Chapter 8: Discrepancy	<u>8</u>
Chapter 9: Betrayal	<u>33</u>
Chapter 10: Solitude	<u>60</u>
Chapter 11: Truth	<u>86</u>
Chapter 12: Decision	<u>162</u>
Last Chapter	<u>169</u>

Character Introductions

Miku: An up-and-coming actress in the Burlet Company. She was chosen to play the lead role of Crazy∞nighT, the Villager, after her audition.

Doll Girl: A bright and cheery, yet foolish doll girl with ball joints.

Doll Boy: A cynical and cruel living doll boy with ball joints.

Master: A gloomy noble with a hobby of collection. The owner of the mansion in the woods.

Mistress: The Master's wife. A boozehound who loves tea and conversation.

Lady: The adoptive daughter of the Master and Mistress. A selfish girl.

Maid: A girl who works for the Master. She makes mountains out of molehills.

Butler: A youth who serves the Master. Overly serious, like a solid mass of common sense.

Glossary

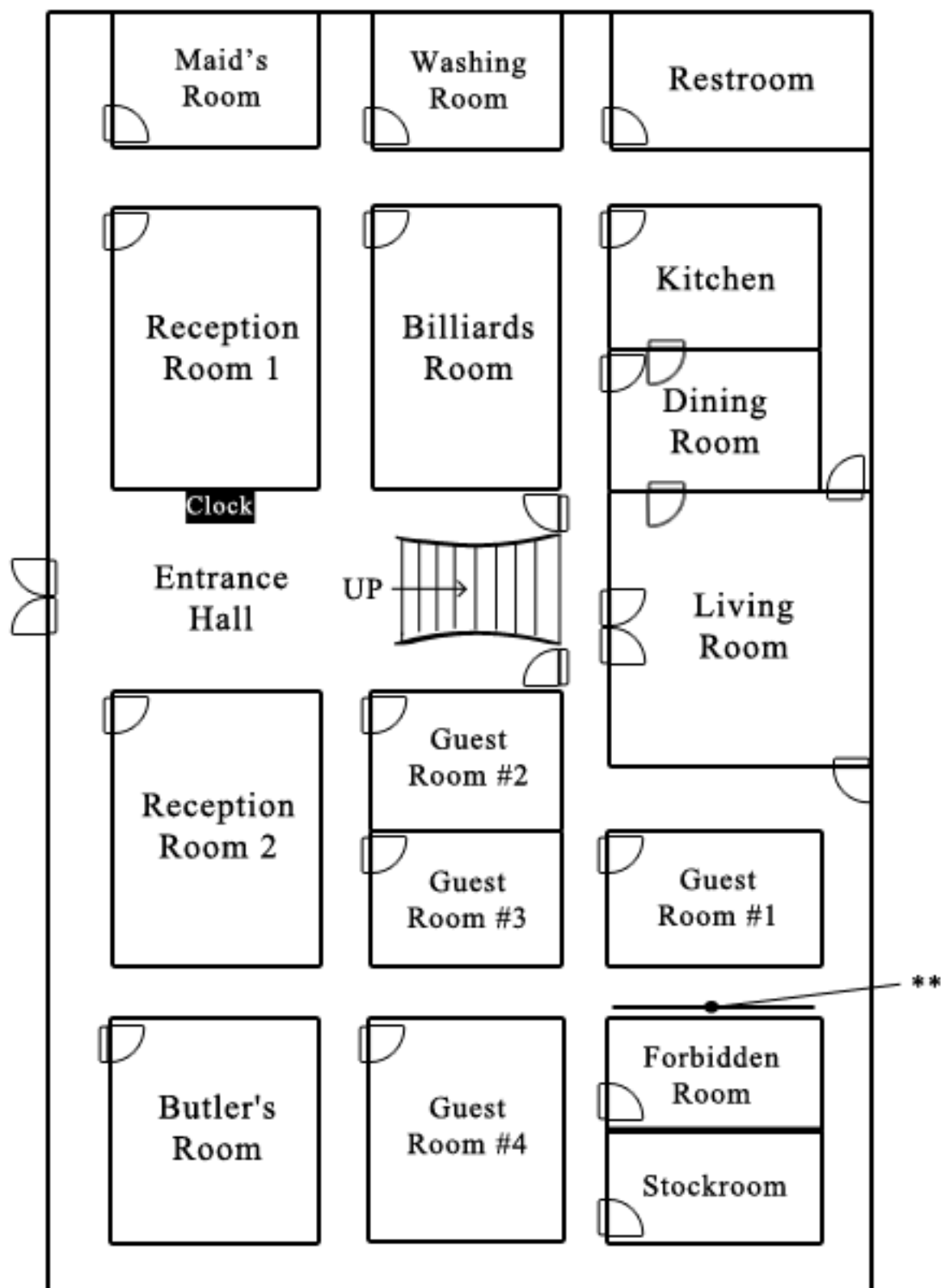
Crazy∞nighT: A lost Burlet script for which only the title had been revealed. It was discovered in the underground cellar of the Burlet Company.

Zacry Village: The home village of Miku and the playwright Mr. Burlet.

Mr. Burlet: A legendary playwright who, a century ago, kicked off a golden age of theater. He sought perfection, and an anecdote claims “any who profanes a Burlet play will meet an unhappy death.”

The Burlet Company: The acting troupe established by Mr. Burlet. Once highly prosperous, it has lost much of its former glory, and business is not faring well.

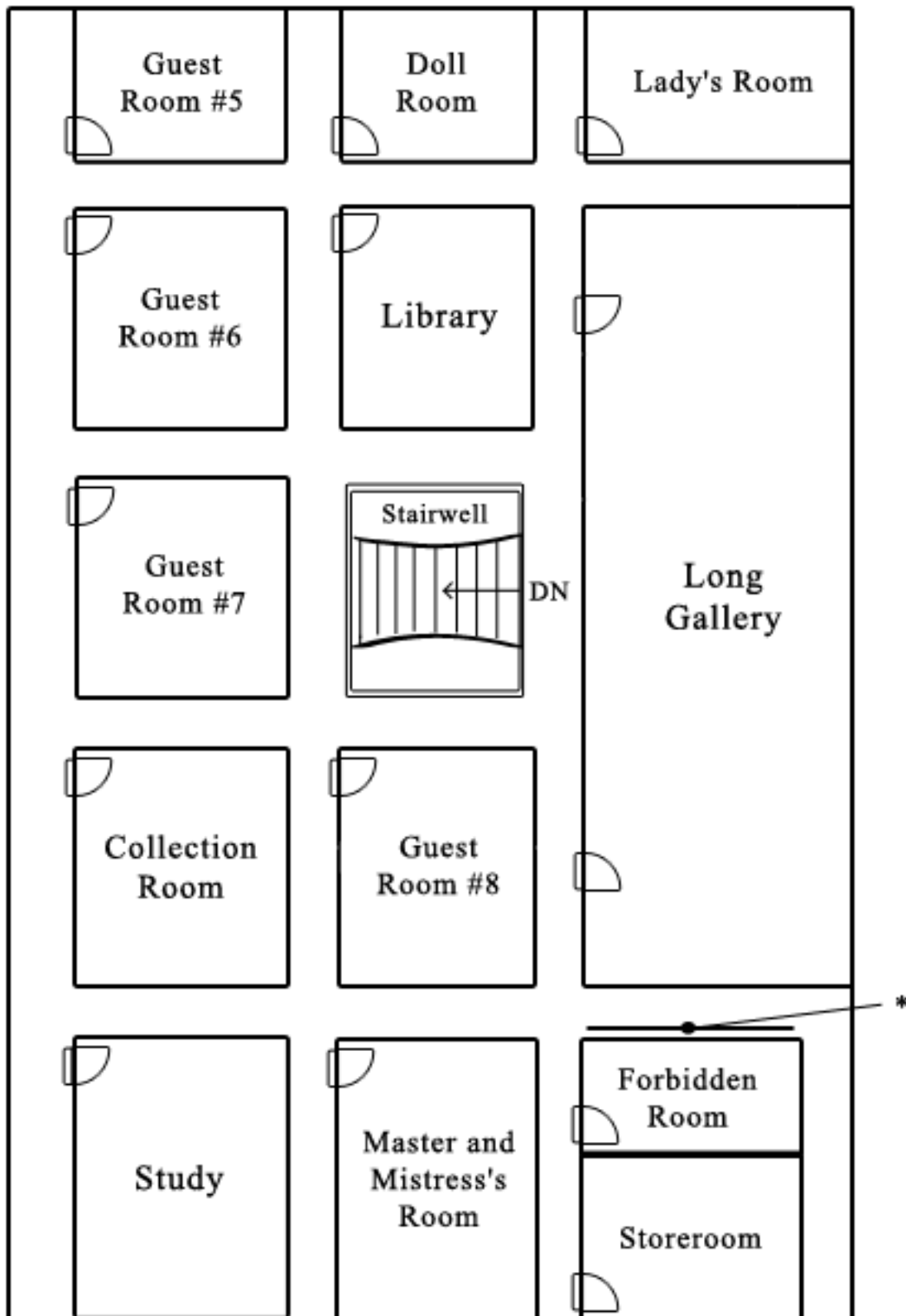
Mansion 1st Floor Top-Down View



* Below the 1F stairs is a wine cellar.

** Twilight ∞ night Painting

Mansion 2nd Floor Top-Down View



* Twilight ∞ nighT Painting

Chapter 8: Discrepancy

First night

One night, when the wind blew fiercely, seven actors celebrated a play.

It was a very joyous party. Then an eighth woman, a friend of theirs, visited.

The woman said she had found a letter speaking of a sin the seven friends had committed.

And that she would reveal their secret...

The seven were bewildered, and indignant.

Because they had important business they had to carry out, sin or not.

The actors blamed the woman. They said that revealing that secret would be to betray them.

But the woman stood her ground. She insisted that she was in the right.

She gave up on the quarrel and attempted to leave, and the seven tried to stop her.

But the woman stood her ground.

Negotiations failed to resolve satisfactorily.

At last, the woman produced a knife she happened to have in her pocket and threatened the seven.

The seven faltered.

However, by this point, they would not give in either.

If the truth within that letter, their sin, were revealed, all their efforts would be in vain.

There was a dispute and an ugly scuffle... and then.

Perhaps it was a prank played by the goddess of fate... To her, miracle and accident is all the same.

How easy the gears of tragedy begin to spin.

The woman tumbled down the stairs.

Once she reached the bottom... the knife was plunged into her chest.

The woman died... And what a tragic death.

The actors pitied her unlucky death and grieved.

And they thought this.

"If only this tragedy we see before us were the same as the plays we perform, the first scene of a fictional world...

Oh, if only time could come to a stop."

But the play of her life, where she was the lead, had already come to an end.

And so they decided to consign her tragic death to oblivion.

To hide everything in the theater's secret cellar, inside a coffin... ∞

Sweat ran down my fingers as I turned to the final page. The thick book filled with words... Every time I flipped its pages, the words jumped out at me as if being typed directly into my head.

"I... know this... I know it!"

"HM...?"

I clearly remembered now. The events of "First night" were exactly those of the nightmare I'd had this morning. Seven men and women were gathered for a party, one came late and made an statement that caused an uproar, tried to run while still in discord with her friends... and died doing so. The dream I saw certainly went up to there. But if this book was the same as my dream, then had the seven tried to cover up her death afterward, and hide her corpse in a coffin? In a room underneath the theater...?

"It definitely is the same as that... No doubt."

"As WHAT...?"

"I had a dream this morning. When was rolling around in bed and couldn't sleep... I forgot all about it until now. But now... I can vaguely remember it."

"ReMEMber?"

"What's written in this book. Eight men and women... and seven of them chased one of the women, and she died. I think it was an accident, but... I feel like it could be interpreted as them killing her, too."

"Eight ACTors...? Just LIKE us, huh?"

"..."

Yes, exactly the same. The script of Crazy ∞ nighT, and this world. What connection did they have to my dream and First nighT? Was my dream a premonition...? Or...

“But WOW, so you can reMEMber DREAMS that clearly... We DOLLS can’t even DREAM, so we WOULDn’t know. Even remembering the NUMber of PEOPLE in your dream...”

“...I don’t dream very often, so I don’t know if that’s normal or not...”

“Was it really SEVEN chasing THE girl...?”

“Yes...”

“Really? Good JOB remembering that number. Since you don’t SEEM that SMART, miss VILLager.”

“Agh...”

“Hey, WHY do you reMEMber? Did you SEE everyONE’s faces? Their VOIces?”

“...No... I didn’t see. Or, well, maybe I saw them, but I don’t remember now. I can’t remember at all... Or what their voices were like, either.”

“HMM. But LET’S see, if you counted YOURself as someONE in the DREAM, then SUBtracting yourself, it would be SEVEN people... or NOT?”

“Eh?”

I focused my thoughts on my memories of the dream again, but...

As I thought, I wasn't going to remember anything more about it. The Doll Boy was looking at me seriously, not a hint of teasing.

"I think... I wasn't looking from anyone's viewpoint in particular in the dream. Like, if it were a play, and I weren't sitting in the audience, but was still close to the actors - that was how close I seemed to be. So if I included myself, it would actually go up to *nine*, maybe...? I'm not really sure. That's about all I can say about where I was watching from... Dreams usually aren't from one view anyway, it's like... a weird, ambiguous string of points."

"I SEE..."

The Doll Boy put his little left hand to his chin and went "hmm," showing that he was thinking.

"...You SAID you couldn't rememBER any faces or voiCES, but... Do you THINK they could have been OURS?"

He tilted his cute little head to the side and grinned slightly. But while the look in his eyes started out as slightly curious, as if that curiosity had changed into a greedy tenacity, he now looked at me obstinately with a hint of madness. His gaze was so sharp and cutting, I found myself turning away to escape it. If I were caught deep in those eyes... I felt like my heart's deepest secrets, ones which even I didn't know, might be exposed. My dried-up throat finally moved.

"...Umm... I don't know. I mean, I don't remember anything at all about the people in it. I only remember that... the person who

died...”

Yes, I remembered that the woman who died was called the “lead role.”

“...was the lead ROLE?”

“...!”

Why did he know that? The book hadn’t said a word about that...

“If the LEAD died in the middle of the PLAY...”

“...”

“...Do you THINK the story would END there?”

I hesitated, having no immediate answer to the question. Generally, the lead wouldn’t die in the middle. If the lead were to die, it was left for the finale of the story... and only when the ending was a tragic one. In the case of a book, there would be no one left to tell the story, and certainly in a play, it wasn’t common to keep going on and on after the lead died. The common reply was that such a thing wouldn’t be interesting.

“...”

“You DON’T know? I guess YOU are a little slow, AREn’t you, miss Villager. That’s a GOOD quality for a LEAD, though...”

“...”

I wasn’t sure if the cruel doll was complimenting me or insulting me.

“The LEAD usually won’t DIE. If they DO, the STOrY will end there. But THERE is a way to keep GOing...”

“There is...?”

“Yes. IF... the lead can be rePLACED. If the lead dies, BUT the baTON passes to the NEXT lead, it’s FINE. Then the STOrY goes on forEVER.”

“Replace the lead...?”

“You SWITCH the lead, and it beCOMES the story of the NEW lead. Doesn’t THAT happen all the time in THE human world? HIStory... Everyone writes EVERlasting stories of inheriTANCE. If the lead DIES... Just look FOR someone ELSE, and bring them IN as the NEW lead. And you should KEEP quiet TO the new one aBOUT it. *That’s just NATUral*. For NEW people to keep focusing on OLD, ended things, that’s UNnatural. Those stoRIES aren’t interesting. There’s noTHING weird about moving to a new lead’s CHAPter in a story, eiTHER. If it’s a play with eight PEOple... You prepare a NINTH.”

“A ninth...”

Look for a new lead, and bring them in. In place of the lead who’s passed on. A ninth person for a play that only needs eight... I was stuck on something here. The person in my dream who was fated to die and enter a coffin... Just who was she...?

I unconsciously brought my hand to my chest. The time remaining in the play had gone down a little more. What now? There’s no time. I have to hurry and do something. Do what? Right, the page! I

had to get out of here and search. And think...!

“There’s one MORE good thing I’ll TELL you.”

“Um, I should...”

“You don’t NEED to be in such a HURry.”

“Don’t hurry...? But, the performance time! It’s way past halfway gone, so I can’t just...”

“And if it does RUN out? Will we go aWAY?”

“Huh...?”

“Sure, THE us of NOW will go away. But that’s only the END *of THIS play*. It can conTINUE again another NIGHT.”

Another...? The Doll Girl had said something similar. “Today will go on.” I wondered what it meant. I looked the Doll Boy in the eyes, and his gaze said “Come with me.” This time he walked to a bookcase on the opposite side of before, to the right from the door. He scrutinized a few of the thick books, but seemed unable to find the one he was looking for. As usual, nothing was written on the bindings of any of the books, so it was hard to search.

After watching him look for a book from behind for a while, I noticed one of the teddy bears elegantly sitting in a leather armchair was holding a book. What a strange sight. I approached and looked at the book. The title was Bad ∞ End ∞ Night.

Just flipping through the pages, it was the same as before; the words flowed direct into my thoughts like a muddy stream. The

waves that those words comprised crashed hard against my mind. The unexpected shockwave nearly carried away my senses with it. The final wave withdrew, and I turned the last page, then let my hands down powerlessly. The book collapsed upon the deep crimson carpet.

“...”

A tempest of emotions swirled in me, and I was at a loss for words. This had to be... some kind of elaborate joke, right? I hoped it was.

“AhHH... I was going to recomMEND something less inTENSE first...”

The Doll Boy approached me carrying a small stack of books in his hands. But after being swept up by that wave of words, I was just barely hanging on to a boulder along the bank. I wouldn't be surprised if I were swallowed up by such fierce rapids. I was giving all my might to cling onto this small, unreliable rock to not be swept away. I had no time to piece together the swirling words. With trembling hands, I grabbed my shoulders.

The actress playing the Villager was suddenly sucked into a strange play world, and was greatly confused. While running around the mansion looking for an exit, she found a cellar. And eight coffins. This frightened her more than ever, and she tried to run, but the seven inhabitants of the mansion... no, the seven actors who were once her colleagues and friends, persistently chased her. Only the actress playing the Villager knew that this was a play... She couldn't get through to them; her friends had gone mad. She ran all around

the mansion, but the others chased the Villager until she came to a stop. Convinced that at this rate, she'd also be killed and put in those coffins... the Villager remembered that the hour hand of the stopped clock was a knife, and she -

"Lies... This is all lies... I don't remember this at all... This isn't me!"

"...MemoRY is a BORing book. Its pages won't alWAYS be open..."

"...No way... But..."

"If this TIME ends, there is still a NEXT time. It goes ON and ON. FOREver..."

Forever. This play world... the one I thought I'd been suddenly trapped in after picking up that strange letter on stage... Had it actually already repeated again and again? Was that "Bad ∞ End ∞ Night" merely a single act of the repeating night...?

"These BOOKshelves are quite a MASTerpiece, aren't THEY...?"

"...!!"

It couldn't be... all these books without titles on the bindings. Were *all* of these bookshelves that filled up the walls of the room...?! No...!!

"Then, First night, too...? Is that..."

"Wrong. THAT one is difFERENT. That didn't HAPpen in this play..."

"..."

"If you DON'T remember anything, well, it's BETter that WAY..."

“Huh...?”

I couldn't see the Doll Boy's lowered expression from here. His gaze was different now... this boy who only came up to around my hips. It was nearly the same look as when he'd held that blue bouquet and teased me. Not like the other him.

Did they remember, I wonder? That this night had repeated again and again. I was the only one who knew this world wasn't reality. And yet, had I also been the only one to forget that it repeated again and again...? And what did it mean that First night was the one book here that wasn't an event in this play?

A bright light flashed in the room, and I was dazed for a moment. This room had no windows. I turned toward the entrance, and the door which the small boy had surely locked earlier was slightly open. A flash of lightning had come in through the large window at the end of the hallway.

I left the library, and still in a daze, went down the stairs. I went behind the stairs to the hallway between the entrance hall and the living room, turned right, headed straight ahead, and after I passed guest room #1, to my left I could see the hallway that had that giant wall-covering painting. I paced quickly without stopping, as if being drawn in by something. I proceeded ahead listening only to my own footsteps.

Right as that Twilight ∞ nighT painting entered my vision and I glanced toward it - the Master appeared at the end of the hallway. I was certain he was still checking the second floor rooms he was assigned; why was he so far from them...?

“Hey. Can you lend a hand? I want you to look in the stockroom on the first floor.”

“Err...”

“It’s not a very big room, but it has a lot of things. Ideal for hiding something. It might take a little while... but search as diligently as you can. The others are finishing up their last rooms, it seems.”

“Are they, now...”

“So, were you headed somewhere?”

His question made me ask myself why I was standing here right now. Hadn’t I been headed to the study on the second floor to look for the Master...? But when I left the library and absent-mindedly wandered in no particular direction, I ended up way over here... as if my destination had been the Twilight ∞ nighT painting. Why in the world...?

“...I was just walking around trying to find someone...”

“I see... All right. For now, I’d like you to go to the far stockroom. Once you’re done, meet up in the study upstairs and report. I’m in the middle of informing everyone right now.”

“...Understood.”

As the Master instructed, I promptly headed for the room in the

southeast corner of the first floor. It was a rather widely-built storage room.

By now, I'd noticed how most objects were just background for the play; "papier mache," so to speak. For instance, the vase of white lilies on the glass table on the living room which had looked so real. It looked exactly like real flowers in a vase, with water. But it had no properties beyond giving the impression of "there's a vase there," so you couldn't even take the flowers out of the vase. As I searched through the stockroom filled to the brim with such props, I began to predict that I wouldn't find that next page. My busily-moving hands gradually came to a stop.

I probably should have asked the Master when we met in the hallway. Why hadn't anyone told me this world was repeating itself? Did everyone know that? Or was it just the Doll Boy assigned to the library who happened to find out? Why hadn't we searched people's bodies in our search for the page? Why had we found no sign of the next page after all this searching?

I read some of the other books the Doll Boy brought from the shelves, besides that repulsive Bad ∞ End ∞ Night one. They were all events I had no recollection of. But I suppose they were Crazy ∞ nighTs that had been performed. If I were to take the Doll Boy at his word, then I... then all of us had repeated the script of Crazy ∞ nighT a mind-numbing number of times. And in the books he showed me too, as expected, everyone was searching for a stolen page, just like now. But there wasn't even a single one where the page was found in time...!

“I’m... always alone, huh...”

Everyone had forgotten the real world, and they were made part of this one. As much as I tried to tell them that fact at the outset of this absurd act, they didn’t seem to comprehend, every time. Which meant it was really only me who was trapped in this world, wasn’t it? These people were just fictional creations of this world, and the real ones were elsewhere... Yes, still back in reality. It was just me who was invited to this world as a guest... as the lead role.

In that case, I think I could understand why only I lost my memory every time. If everything but myself was papier mache, and even the characters were purely fake, then I wouldn’t even have to feel lonely. And that horrid book that I dared not even remember...

That Bad ∞ End ∞ Night - I absolutely wouldn’t believe that it was something I had actually done. Even if they were fakes, how could I kill them... kill my friends with my own hands?! I opened my clenched hands in front of my face, staring at them hard enough to bore a hole. I had absolutely no memory of it. But when I closed my eyes, I could faintly picture my hands being stained in blood.

It was just my imagination, surely... a spineless weakling like me could never do such a thing. I shook my head to knock it out of my brain, but the intense and ghastly image wouldn’t go away easily. Guilt crept up on me for something I hadn’t even remembered doing. My throat was completely parched.

This wouldn't do... I would go mad from my suspicion, guilt, and self-hatred. I needed something to change my mood and calm me down just briefly... Something to calm my heart...

"Our maid's tea is truly superb. It just calms your heart, doesn't it?"

Suddenly, the Mistress's line crossed my mind. After she repeated it three times word-for-word, like brainwashing, it was well-ingrained in my mind. Yes, tea...! But... I remembered the principles of this world. Only the Maid could make tea. The Villager, a guest, surely couldn't go to the kitchen, boil water, and make her own tea. That said, I didn't feel like tracking down the Maid now and having her make me some. My mind was still in disarray; I didn't want to meet anyone.

I had to do something to recover from this crushing unease, no matter how small... I understood now, just the tiniest bit, how the Villager who'd enacted Bad ∞ End ∞ Night must have felt. This mental state I was in was very dangerous. So much had happened in one night, and I had no one to share it with, to consult with, to depend on... That situation had actually lasted far, far longer than I even knew, and each time I would forget... learn what I forgot, and forget again... all that on loop. I never knew when madness could creep up from behind in a moment of weakness. Even my own self, the only one I could trust since coming to this world, was someone I couldn't help but fear.

The Butler had said that the world is what we perceive. If so, then myself and the world I was perceiving now were real. But then,

were “real” things which were separate from my perception, and long since forgotten, no longer real? I’d forgotten acting out Bad ∞ End ∞ Night, and while I’d been told now that it had once been real, I couldn’t accept that; so had it become fake? And so had the real world...

While ceaselessly turning over my memories since coming to this world, I suddenly remembered. When I was talking with the Butler, hadn’t there been just a little bit of wine left? Alcohol would do fine. I could drink a little to brighten my spirits some. I hurried for the wine cellar.

I creaked open the wine cellar door. The Butler wasn’t there. Where had he put away that not-yet-empty wine bottle...? I searched for the single bottle with just a bit of real wine among all the fakes.

“...Here it is!”

I found the minuscule amount of wine which was barely enough for a single glass. But I didn’t hold my drinks well, so just this could get me pretty drunk. The bottle had been re-corked. I took a nearby sommelier knife, screwed it into the cork, and slowly twisted. Once the cork was out, an aroma like fresh roses wafted out.

There were no glasses in the cellar. I was hesitant to go to the kitchen, on the off chance the Maid or Mistress would show up. It may have been bad manners, but I would just drink from the bottle.

No one was watching. I held it in both hands, held it up above my head, and turned it downward.

For an instant, there was roaring thunder that seemed to shake the whole room. The low roar rang out with such exact timing as to seem like it was trying to stop me from doing what I was about to do.

“Yahhh!”

Frightened by the surprising sound, I spilled the wine.

“Ahh...”

Yet another blunder. I only wanted the slightest chance to get away from my depressed and desperate state... But even that wouldn't go as I wanted. Ultimately, I only felt worse. Not even being bothered to sigh, I looked at where it'd spilled. Some was on the stone floor, and some had stained my skirt a little. As I reached for the handkerchief in my pocket, I noticed that letter inside had also gotten a bit of the wine on it.

“Ah... The letter got stained...”

It was thinly dyed with the color of the wine. And was it just me, or were the wine-covered areas actually a little whiter than the faded brown paper...? I brought my eyes closer. But actually, it hadn't gotten whiter - the paper itself was giving off a faint light.

“This is...!”

The same as when I was about to take First nighT in the library; the book had faintly glowed for a brief moment. And it surprised me enough to make the stepladder fall. Why was it shining...? What if there were some common point between First nighT and this letter? I remembered what the Doll Boy said: that First nighT wasn't part of this play. Then from its title... I could make some predictions.

Perhaps that book wasn't a part of this fictional world, and had been brought in from reality... Or perhaps it was the events written in that book which took place elsewhere - in the real world. Yet it had some kind of connection to this world... If the common point between First nighT and this letter was “the real world,” then what if the letter was the key to returning to reality? If it could be used as the “End roLL,” like the envelope said, then maybe it could end the play and lead back to reality!

My downtrodden mood was suddenly lifted. If I could write an ending about returning to reality on this blank sheet, what would happen? For instance, if I wrote “The play ended, the actors regained their memories and bodies, and they all returned to the real world”... Would it really happen just like that? Or else, no, we would have to perform as the mastermind who sealed us in this world wanted us to, and write the ending that way; and no matter what we wrote, we wouldn't get back to reality.

If the laws of this play world were in effect, then what was written

in the script was absolute, and everything and everyone acted accordingly... Well, I would just have to give it a try to find out. Okay...!

I dipped my right index finger in the pool of wine on the floor and drew lines on the paper. But this time, it didn't glow. As a test, I wrote in short words, "All went back to reality," but alas, nothing happened. Maybe it wouldn't start to take effect until this was put in as the final page of the script. Or else the words written with the wine were too light, and having to strain your eyes to make them out wouldn't do. Or maybe even it had to be written with something like a pen. I didn't know how it worked, but if I tried all the possibilities, then maybe...

But... What if I failed?

All the information I'd gathered since waking up would go back to a blank sheet. Would I forget everything again, and repeat the same actions? I'd wake up in an unfamiliar place, realize I was sucked into a strange world, be overcome with panic and fear... Then the others who had forgotten themselves and been made part of the play would appear... I'd despair, and vow to help bring everyone back to reality... In the middle, I'd learn that this world was repeating again and again...

Every detail of the night wasn't guaranteed to happen the same way every time. A single one of my actions could change the entire outcome; it had resulted in a different ending each time. After countless nights, I'd finally found a major possible hint toward

returning to reality, so I didn't want to fail here.

I have to save everyone...

There was still time. I put my hand to my chest to check; about two-thirds of the play had elapsed.

In the back of my mind, I pictured everyone's expressions I'd seen since being sucked into this world. It was possible that they were always part of this world, and thus completely fake from the beginning. But no matter what, I couldn't think of them as mere fabrications.

There were many instants where their actions, words, and expressions overlapped with the habits of their real world counterparts. So they were the real ones, who in being adapted into this world's systems, forgot their real names and other memories... This seemed like the most likely explanation to me. Thus, the only one who could save them from this crazed world of night was me, Miku, the one who hadn't lost sight of her past, true self. In order to prevent another Bad ∞ End ∞ Night from taking place here... I had to firmly believe in Miku, in myself.

I wiped up my wet skirt with the handkerchief. The brand new one I'd just gotten from Luka. But now that I'd learned that I'd already spent ages in this world and had just forgotten about it, I saw the new handkerchief as already being worn out. How strange... Of course just knowing the reality wouldn't make any physical changes. I knew that it was only my mind that changed. Yet... I

couldn't believe how different an impression it gave me.

The light green leaves were dyed the pale color of the wine. The formerly pink roses sucked up the color, looking like they were in full bloom. I had to wash this once I got home... I squeezed the wet handkerchief tight, carefully put it in my pocket, and stood up.

To gather clues about ending this play and returning to reality, first, I had to know the whole picture. There were many books in the library, and while there could be hints piled up in all those past events... after a bit of hesitation, I shook my head. I didn't have time to read them all one by one. Right now, it was better to make the most of the possibilities on hand, and solve the mysteries in front of me. I had to investigate the points of interest thoroughly...

I proceeded right down the hallway after leaving the wine cellar, and on my left appeared the forbidden room outside which the Twilight ∞ night painting hung. When I left the library in my dumbstruck state of mind and wandered, I somehow found myself drawn here. There had to be a reason for it; I'd forgotten about how long a time I'd spent in this world, but surely my *body* remembered.

When Meg poured me milk tea for the first time here in the living room, I was certain my hand slipped and dropped the teacup, but that didn't actually happen. Surprising even myself, I took the hard-to-hold cup skillfully and without hesitation to drink the tea. That

odd discrepancy... it was caused by my memory loss. *My body remembered, but my mind forgot.* So my mind would think “why?” about subconsciously natural actions it had forgotten. In that case, I could stop thinking and let my body carry itself to hints I had gathered in the past... Hopefully.

I gazed at the Twilight ∞ night painting on the wall thoughtlessly. My right hand, seeming to know the truth of it, reached out toward the left palm of the girl dancing in the middle of the painting, which was faced forward. Since the girl was drawn life-size, it looked somewhat like I was putting my hand against a mirror, she on the inside and I on the outside. Then I noticed there was a slight indentation on that palm, and as if trying to enter the painting, I leaned in toward it.

There was a sudden *clunk* of movement, and I pulled my hand away. Was there a switch in the indent on her palm? The wall slowly and silently receded back into the “forbidden room.” When it was finally done, a spiral staircase leading to the basement appeared. So this forbidden room hadn’t been a room to begin with, only a secret spiral staircase.

I peered at the dark stairwell. Lamps along the wall provided faint light. A gentle breeze blew up from below; maybe the basement had ventilation of some kind that led outside. Still leaving it to my body, I went down step by step. Just how deep did this go...? The long staircase went on so long, I couldn’t even tell how much progress I’d made.

After walking for a while, large doors appeared before me. The old wooden doors were definitely heavy, but putting all my weight against them made them slowly creak open. The musty stone room was bathed in light by lamps around the walls. Going inside and looking around, I found many coffins. I fearfully counted them.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven... eight.

Eight coffins... I approached the one positioned way at the back and slowly put my hand on the cover. But appearing to be locked, it wouldn't come off. Same for the coffin beside it, and the one beside that... I checked every one, but none would open. A loud, discouraged sigh reverberated in the quiet room.

At this point, I came back to my senses.

Thinking about the unconscious actions I'd just done, I backed away from the coffin in front of me. I'd tried to open these coffins. When I let my body take over, in an exceedingly natural way, it checked each and every coffin, longing for something inside them. Like something inside the coffins was drawing me toward them...

While this could have been connected to a hint regarding returning to reality, since I didn't remember anything, I was hesitant to open these closed coffins without any clear aim. I was glad they were locked... it was a good thing they didn't open, I thought with deep relief.

But at the same time, a vague intuition that I *had* to open these

coffins quickly began to swirl in my head. The two thoughts mingled, and I pondered what to do for a while. But either way, the coffins seemed to be locked, so they wouldn't open for now. A cursory look around didn't turn up any keys or anything, either.

Amid the books I read in the library, there had been no mention of opening these coffins. The Master had divided up the rooms to everyone and told them to search diligently for the next page, but for some reason he omitted this room of coffins, not even bringing it up. Did the others want to hide this room's existence from me, the Villager? Was that a natural part of their role as the mansion's residents? In fact, in past scripts, the Master had told me to stay away from this area, saying it was dangerous. But I had a feeling there was something important hidden in these coffins. Like it said in the First nighT book...

"But the play of her life, where she was the lead, had already come to an end.

And so they decided to consign her tragic death to oblivion.

To hide everything in the theater's secret cellar, inside a coffin... ∞"

A secret cellar with coffins; in First nighT, it only said that the dead woman was being hidden. But here there were eight coffins, all carefully locked... On the side of each coffin was a thin, rectangular hole I supposed served as a keyhole, that looked about the right size for a thick playing card. Was there an item that was a perfect fit for this somewhere in the mansion? Would I have to search for that, too, in the short remaining time?

For now, there didn't seem to be anything more I could do in this underground room. I turned on my heel, headed to the entrance, and put all my might into opening the heavy doors again, this time pulling. Then in the corner of my eye, I noticed a thick wooden bar for the door leaning against the wall beside it. Aha, so the room could be locked from the inside. Should I use this latch? I went and looked at the other side of the doors, and saw no keyhole or way to lock them from outside.

After thinking about it a while, I decided to leave the heavy doors open. Having to open them again would take up time. I left the room of coffins behind and hurried up the spiral stairs. Before I went looking for the key to the coffins, I'd meet up with the others. I hadn't even come close to finishing the Master's request to search the stockroom, but surely the next page wouldn't actually be there... so I felt.

There was something more important for me to report: that there might be a hint leading toward the ending in these underground coffins. And everyone was told to meet in the study and report as they each finished searching, so who knows, maybe someone really had found the next page. We were pressed for time, but there was still some hope. If we all brought together our knowledge, surely... we'd be able to manage something. Trying to keep in my hopeful excitement, I hurried up the grand stairs in the entrance hall and made a beeline for the study.

Chapter 9: Betrayal

When I reached the study, the door was slightly ajar, and I heard a voice from inside.

“Come, Len, you know it’s forbidden to take her into the library. Won’t she find out?”

Those words I overheard without even attempting to made my right hand freeze on the door handle. That was the Mistress’s voice. And she said something I shouldn’t have possibly heard. Had I misheard it? The voices in the room echoed off the tell ceiling, wood walls, and floor, reaching slightly outside as well. I brought my face near the gap in the door and peered into the room. The seven had already gathered. They were scattered around the room, keeping their distance from one another. The room was dim, so I didn’t think they could notice me.

The Mistress stood next to the fireplace on the far left side, the Lady sat in the big sofa in front of the fireplace, and on the right was the Butler gazing out the window. Sitting in two armchairs closest to the door were the Doll Twins. Right and ahead from the door was the Maid sitting in a chair pulled out from the desk. And in the center of the room, under the extravagant chandelier, stood the Master with arms crossed. Everyone’s faces were stern.

“Don’t be rash. Focus on the performance, all right? It’ll be bad if she opens those coffins.”

“I just thought it might have some interesting “effects” to tell her.

And there were some things I wanted to ask her directly..."

"And what if that put her on guard, hm?"

"...Look, I said "my bad.""

"Geez! Len, are you reeeally sorry? I was listening to you two talk outside the door. You told her some pret-ty risky stuff, you know... You nearly spilled all the beans!"

"...Thought there was someone there. It was you, huh?"

"Yep! ALWAYS have to KEEP my eye on you!"

"There's been so little excitement... Why not cut loose a little from time to time? There's no way she isn't going to notice we're all *getting tired of this*. This... silly play business."

"That's cutting it a little *too* loose. We're all taking this seriously. I'm glad Rin at least refrained from following up on what you did. But on the off chance something happened..."

"Meiko's right! I was passing through the hall, and I thought something was up with you two upstairs, so I just went to take a peek! And then what do you know..."

"...If you're going to preach, there's way more valid targets than me this time. Like you there - all gloomy by yourself, not taking part in the discussion. Getting so flustered... That was one convincing act."

"..."

"...Miss Lukaaa? Are you okay...?"

"...Eh?"

"Everyone's reports will influence the course of things. Luka, I'm

sure you're exhausted, but you're a dear friend to us. Won't you tell us what's wrong?"

"Kaito's right, Luka. Keep your head up! What's that gloomy face about? If you have concerns, we can talk them out."

"...It's nothing, really."

"...You're just depressed about your crude performance, aren't you? "Maybe this is the afterlife"... If I were in charge there, I would've instantly made my exit after such a dangerous line. But isn't it fine that you managed to *fool that idiot* anyway? Of course, I would have easily seen through such a novice act..."

"W... What did you say?! Len... Who do you think you're talking to, here?"

"...To our star actress. But I have the better resume, don't I?"

"Yes, Mr. Len does have more experience than Miss Luka, and quite a lot of talent! And good looks, too..."

"...Meg, are you trying to pick a fight with me too? Don't get so cocky, you big-headed slowpoke!"

"W-What does that have to do with this?! You're terrible!"

"You're always the most useless one of us, even when we were *chasing her*! You're just a pokey turtle! Is your head too heavy with all that useless knowledge?"

"Now, calm down, everyone! This is no time to be fighting. We *still don't have the letter*, after all..."

"Yeah, guys! I can understand your haste, but... Well, there isn't

much time left, either...”

“...Isn’t your blunder the reason we’re all hasty, Rin?”

“Wha...”

“It was your job to *steal the letter*, right? If you can’t do that, how about passing the job to me?”

“I-I can...! Just, that time I... the timing was... not the best...”

“And wasn’t it the same thing the time before that? Failed because of “bad timing.” If you can’t handle it, I’ll do it. We can’t have you dragging us down.”

“...!”

“Hey, Len, cool it. Rin’s tired, too. Girls are more delicate than you might think, you know...?”

“Ahahaha... Very funny. From that harsh look, I thought you might have a put-down like that, mister “feminist.””

“...Um, Len...”

“...We all fall to exhaustion sometimes. It’s got nothing to do with gender, Kaito. If there’s any reason for it, it’s being in this crazed night.”

“Len...”

“Crazed... Yes, it certainly is, isn’t it. Len, you weren’t so talkative in that world, were you? You were always putting on that cool pretense. Well, but I couldn’t usually tell what you were really thinking. But you really fit right into the role of that ill-speaking doll, don’t you, cute little doll boy? Have you just turned into the real thing? Hahaha...”

“Luka, you settle down too. You two never used to fight like this... Look, we can’t be blaming and finding fault with one another. Let’s have your reports first. One after another, everyone.”

“Sigh... All right! I’m getting pretty tired of it, too... Sure, it’s for *real world intervention*, but I’ve made the same royal milk tea more times than I can count. It’s aaaaalways the *exaaaaact saaaaaame thiiiiing*. I could make the same flavor with my eyes closed!”

“Ah, that’s right, Gack. You left her alone instead of keeping watch, didn’t you? Once your intervention was done, you were supposed to bring her back here. But because you left her, she went to the hall first, and Rin’s preparations were delayed. That much could be predicted from *this world’s laws* - if you leave her alone, she’ll surely be drawn toward that place. You have to keep an eye on her...”

“I’m sorry, Miss Meiko. Indeed, it was rash of me. However...”

“...?”

“...I know I’m not the only one who feels these methods are lukewarm.”

“...”

“What... You too, Gack...?! Len, what have you said to him?”

“Like I’d bother with that. I just did what I wanted to do.”

“Len, Gack, don’t disturb our teamwork. There’s a risk of everything going to waste with a single misstep. Until each of us produces

results...”

“Haven’t I gotten results? I’ve experimented with *those stairs* again and again. And this time, the timing was perfect! I feel we’re almost there.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Luka. We can’t speak with certainty yet, even if we are gradually getting results. If we can’t *see it through to the end*... there’s no point.”

“Don’t you see all that excruciating overprudence would go out the window if she happened to notice? Len, Gack, you’re being a bit more forceful, aren’t you? It irritates me, but I have to praise Len for that. Not that I intend to cooperate...”

“Mr. Len, Miss Luka, and Mr. Gack on Team Force, versus Mr. Kaito, Miss Meiko, and Miss Rin on Team Calm... A three on three, huh! And they’re pretty evenly-matched... This is shaping up to be a good game!”

“Meg... There you go again...”

“Miss Meg, that’s a bit forceful of you to put me “Team Force.” I just thought I’d try something a little different...”

“Of course the mystery nerd would act like a detective and take a moderate position... Must be nice to be so carefree. Like Gack says, I wouldn’t go that far. We were just *experimenting*. Better than the rest of you, huh?”

“Mr. Len! I’m doing my part too, you know? I’m watching all of you in the most neutral way I can! A play needs a part like that, doesn’t it?”

“It certainly does... if this were merely a detective story. But if we *all* want to cooperate together, we don’t need a neutral party.”

“That’s naïve, Miss Meiko! It’s impossible to ask this many people to all be thinking the exact same way!”

“Meg! Have you forgotten everything we practiced? We’ve always worked together...”

“That’s right, Rin. Meg and Len have been throwing off our teamwork lately.”

“Speaking of “everyone” and focusing on the whole... certainly, there’s a point that it disallows making use of our individual talents. The assembly of individuals may appear magnificent, but when it becomes a group, it can lose the ability to demonstrate its full potential...”

“To think I’d hear that from you, Gack... Look, can we all just take a break? We’re starting to go mad here.”

“I’d love to do so, but... unfortunately, we don’t have much time for it. We’ve less than a third of the time left. How worrying...”

“Hey, Kaito... What are we going to do? Guys...! Hey... Is this my fault...?”

“It’s not, Rin. In this play, we can’t speak of whose fault anything is.”

“...Oh, can’t we? Seems far worse to keep up that pampering. Sometimes a scolding is in order.”

“Len, you’ve been going too far lately. You should...”

“Ahh, at a standstill again! Always goes like this lately. Maybe Team Force is right, we should change up our methods? Besides, even if no one said anything, if one of us really showed her the lett...”

“Meg, enough. And the rest of you. Enough of this discord. ...At any rate...”

“AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

Suddenly, Luka burst into laughter. The quarrel came to a halt, and everyone stared at her. Giving off a momentary aura that monopolized the audience’s gaze, she had a deranged smile. I felt the illusion that a spotlight was fixed on her. Such overwhelming charisma... Just as her laugh was making me wonder if it would go on forever, it came to a sudden halt, and she fell silent like a wind-up doll stopping.

“Luka...?”

“Ahh, how funny...”

“...”

“...I hate this play... I HATE it!!”

She stood up and swung her left hand at a vase of roses on the table in front of her. The glass shattered with an ear-splittingly shrill sound and water pooled by her feet. The blue roses slept painfully on a bed of scattered glass shards. Silence lasted for a while. Finally, with a slight wheeze, she slumped powerlessly to the wet floor. Her trembling hands went to cover her face, and she screamed painfully.

“Putting on this same night... again and again... this play that no one’s watching!! I’ve had it, I don’t CARE anymore! ...I want to go back to reality, now! To my stage, where the audience is...! You all want that too, don’t you?! DON’T you?!”

No one opened their mouths, and hard-striking rain echoed through the room. If the rain was pouring harder, then the clouds should have thickened too, yet for some reason the moonlight was brighter than before. A large branch outside the window would sometimes be slammed into the window by the wind, making an irregular sound like someone knocking from outside. I put my hands tight to my chest, as if to silence my pulse pounding amid the silence.

“Luka... What are you saying? See, we really ought to rest. I’ve said it again and again, but you’re surely tired. Don’t push yourself...”

Meiko spoke worriedly to break the silence, approached Luka as she stared hollowly at nothing, and held out her hand. Luka continued to gloomily stare dumbfounded into space, and looking as if she didn’t understand why there was a hand there, spoke.

“...What? I just honestly said what I was thinking. The thing that *everyone* is thinking deep down... I said it for you, as a representative...”

“...A representative? Well... I would be lying to say I didn’t think that too, a little. I can’t help but pine for the beer I had on the foyer. And sometimes I have such a craving for those cheese sandwiches

we often had for dinner. I'd love to have one of those fun nights drinking cheap beer and partying again. But... Not alone. Once *everyone* returns together, I want to do that with all of you."

"Meiko... I agree. Listen, Luka! Did you forget *that* vow? We've all worked hard together. We've finally made it this far..."

"Of course I haven't forgotten that abominable night... Even if I wanted to, it sticks in my head like it only just happened. It makes me just want to forget it all at this point... like her. And just go mad... A crazy night... Just like the title says!"

"What?! No, what I meant is..."

"Looking at it as an overall play... the decadent beauty of such an ending could be considered a perfection of the art form. Quite magnificent."

"Hey, stop it! Don't say that, Mr. Gack... Hey, Kaito!"

Rin stood up, ran to Kaito in the center, and clung to his left arm. A common sight... I always saw her clinging to his arm, like a child clinging to a parent. In her small doll body, she could barely even reach his arm. He stooped down slightly and patted her head, saying it would be okay. His hand nearly covered the Doll Girl's head. Rin had the same scared look as when she showed me the stray cat she picked up.

"Miss Luka, you're pretty weak-minded, huh? Giving in to something like this...!"

"Because I'm not a dunce like you. I bet you could get on just fine by yourself, trapped in a place like this. Shameless... You love it,

don't you? This crazed world..."

"It's not like I like this at all! Sure, I enjoy reasoning and making up stories in my head, but really..."

"...“When they actually become reality, then no thanks,” hm? Well, you seem to get quite a kick out of it, considering. ...I’ve been thinking. Could it be that you... *You*...”

"I tell you, I'm not having fun at aaall! I just know it's a necessity to put on a droll character in such a gloomy situation..."

"...Droll character, huh... More “oddball” than anything, aren't you?"

"You too, Len?!"

"Ahaha, you said it. All the scripts you write have characters like that, don't they. They help keep a good balance. But don't you think always striking a balance that way is a bit lukewarm... a bit boring? True art, you know, is much more piercing!"

"...!"

"...I favor that viewpoint, too. Going “too far” is just right. Any less, and nothing gets through.”

Meg bit her lip regretfully at Luka and Len's comments.

"My, so you feel that way too, Len? Yes, we don't like always thinking with our heads. Following intuition, our natural senses... that makes us feel alive. We're simply not suited for something so dull as “working together to accumulate results” in the first place!"

Meiko grimaced and admonished Luka.

“...Luka, I know... no, we all know you’ve been cooperating with us. Please, don’t trample on those memories any more...”

“...True. Then we’ll all go mad together.”

“If we’re going on about this, we already have...”

“I kinda noticed at the point where Mr. Gack stopped chiding me for my slip-ups...”

“...Back in reality, I never once got into an argument with all of you. How bizarre this has become. But... it’s not bad.”

“Stop... Stop it... Guys...”

“Ahahaha! Yes, we’re mad! All of us, already! Ahh, how funny!”

“Hey, Luka! Stop this right here.”

“Say, Kaito, did you always have such a melancholy face? All your usual seducing has gone poof, just like that... You used to be so moonstruck year-round. But now, you’re the strict master of the mansion... Always with that bored, brow-furrowed face of grief. Maybe it’s become no longer an act. Or perhaps... you can’t fight your blood after all? It was the slovenly womanizer who was just an act to drop our guards... and this is how you really are?”

“...!!”

“...Oh my. Was I right? So sorry.”

Kaito’s right hand which he held out to chastise Luka came to a stop, and he stared as if caught in a lie.

“...Well, then it’s a good thing you have such a fitting role, Miss Luka. Your selfish attitude just got an upgrade, and you’re more malicious than ever. Now, you might be perfect for a lead villain!”

“...Look who’s talking.”

“A lead villain? Well, that’s just peachy. A villain is always in a powerful position. Why, villain or hero, it’s all the same! To play a part is to become someone who isn’t you... And to do that, you need to deceive everyone around you... even fooling yourself, yes?! For so, so long we’ve fooled ourselves... and long forgotten who we really are! Oh, the COMEDY!! AHAHAHAHA!”

Luka again opened her mouth wide and laughed loudly, her eyes filled with madness. A string stretched to its limits had snapped. That triggered everyone to hurl slander at each other; by the end, they even scorned, refused, and abused themselves. Lurking behind a beautiful and orderly facade was something that would never be shown on stage: their true faces, uncouth and human. How filthy and ugly it was. As I watched this repulsive scene, my eyes and ears were fixated on them, like I was bound to my seat.

“...You look pale. Luka, someone will take over for you, and you can get back to your room for tonight...”

“Oh, I’m fine. We’ll put an end to this now... Yes, we’ll put an end to all of this, this whole night!”

Luka yelled with eyes open wide. Everyone froze with surprise at the mention of “putting an end to this.” Silence fell again. Rin,

who'd watched the fight anxiously while clinging to Kaito, slowly stepped toward Luka.

"...Hey. Do you really want to make all our effort go to waste? That's just foolish. I misjudged you, Luka..."

Rin stood at the same height as Luka sitting on the floor, and met her deranged gaze directly. Unlike when she was afraid, her face now had a cold look, and emitted a threatening aura hard to imagine from her small body. The two stared each other down, and Luka was the first to turn away. As if readjusting her posture, she sighed loudly, stood up, and spoke looking down on the small Doll Girl.

"...Rin, always playing the good girl... But I know you can't help feeling lonely either. I know you want to escape from here..."

"It's been hard for me, and my body's turned into this... Some of it's more than I can bear. But everyone else is here, so I can't give in yet, can I?"

The Doll Girl's little hands moved to grab something hidden under her collar.

"Hmm. Well then, could you live here your whole life?"

"Well, I mean... I'm sure someday..."

"That locket... You're always talking at it with tears welling up, aren't you?"

"!! W-What are you talking about..."

Rin's shoulders shook.

"My station is the second floor corridor and stairs... I can see you down in the hall easily. Whenever she's not around, you're always squatting and talking into it... "I can't take it, come help, I'm sorry"..."

"...! I-It's not like dad..."

"...My, so it was your father. It was too far away for me to see the photo inside. So you want your father to come save you? Ah, but... who knows if he'll even come to see the likes of you!"

"...hh..."

Rin's face visibly went pale. She trembled, and her small hands covered her face. Gradually, she started to breathe heavily, like she'd just run a marathon.

"Miss Rin!! Are you okay?! Please, breathe slowly!"

Meg instantly responded and held Rin up as she looked about to faint.

"Ahh, so even that doll body can hyperventilate. How fuuunny..."

Whap.

A dry sound rang out. Meiko had walked up to Luka and forcefully smacked her by the left cheek.

“Too far. Don’t you know things have limits?”

“Heehee... Oh, ouuuch. It really hurts... *like it were real!*”

“...”

Meiko and Luka stared at each other quietly. Luka grinned in desperation, like nothing mattered to her anymore, and Meiko didn’t even try to hide her intense fury toward her. It was an explosive situation.

“Ahaha. I haven’t seen Rin be talked down like that in a long time.”

“...Len. Enough of your teasing. What good will it do to bring us even further apart?”

Meiko reprimanded Len for his joking comment on the tense situation between the two, keeping her stern gaze. She was said to have once lived a rough life where she would answer to any fight picked with her. Now, she was the most concerned for those around her, and tried to mellow the situation, but if the quarrel escalated into a scuffle... she would probably be the victor.

She glared coldly at Len. That glare must have been contagious; the temperate in the room seemed to drop. Even I, hiding outside the door, trembled a little. Her anger was frightening. But why was it...? The angrier she got, and the more the others quarreled terribly, an indescribable exaltation welling up from my heart. I felt like I was watching an amusing play.

“Scary...! But I’m not particularly trying to drive anyone apart. Ahh...

I see. So that's *his aim*..."

"His what...? Are you trying to give me the slip?"

"No, no. I don't have any intent of causing discord between everyone. I'm just doing *what only I can do*. Maybe doing the same thing over and over for an absurdly long time *has* driven us mad. But that seems obvious, given the situation. No matter how tough your mind is, when you're in a situation like this, it's more bizarre to *stay* sane. So now, things are finally getting interesting."

"Hah... Sounds like you want a whack too, do you...?"

Fires of rage burned in Meiko's eyes. She turned her body toward Len and took a step forward, but a little hand grabbed it. Rin, who was still breathing roughly, looked up at her silently with tears in her big eyes. Seeing this, the flames died down, with nowhere to go. Meiko took a deep breath to calm herself.

Meg, stroking Rin's back from beside her, took the chance to ask a question.

"Um... Mr. Len, you said "his aim"...? Who do you mean?"

"I mean the mastermind. Stories need action. A play that's all lulls and no conflict, all comfort and pretend friendship, is just boring, isn't it? He's watching as close as he can get... There needs to be more excitement."

Len slowly stood up from his armchair and moved to the center of the room.

“...I’ve been thinking about this a while.”

The Doll Boy’s round, glass-like blue eyes wavered eerily in the soft orange light of the chandelier.

“The mastermind... He’s really *among us*, isn’t he?”

“Huh...? Mr. Len, what...”

“The one who *invited us from reality to Crazy ∞ nighT*... The one who wrote the invitation letter that night... The legendary playwright, Burlet.”

The words directed at no one in particular made the remaining six look up toward Len with a start, faces full of surprise and fear. Everyone froze like stone statues watching his mouth, waiting for his next words. But for some time, he didn’t have them.

Kaito regained composure quickest, and spoke in a serious tone.

“...What do you mean, Len?”

“I always thought it was strange. That night, it was just us *eight* there. No one else. And now, too... it’s *just us*.”

My heart jumped. Did he know I was out here, hiding behind the door...? I held my hands tighter and shut my eyes.

“That’s right. Though I was the last to come in... *That night, too*, everyone else went home before us...”

“But... We’re talking about someone capable of truly strange things. He wouldn’t necessarily look like a normal person, even. Maybe he can, say, make himself invisible at will. Or maybe he’s not human at all? Like a ghost... or a supernatural being.”

“...Maybe. It’s clear he’s not just an ordinary person. But it’s also a fact he existed as a human in the past. Though... then, too, his face, personality, age, lineage... Most information about him was hidden. But I feel something else amiss besides that. I’ve been feeling like someone’s watching me up close... *with the perspective of an audience member simply enjoying the play.*”

“An audience member... up close? You say you sensed them watching?”

“In that letter, the mastermind wrote: *I’m always watching the play up close.* But they didn’t say from *where* exactly. Say this were a world inside a book, and they could just turn the pages whenever they wanted... viewing us from the outside world. I considered it might be a very detached kind of viewing like that. But...”

Len came to a stop to think. Then he put his left index finger to his lips, and turned his gaze right and down. He looked toward the blue roses Luka had knocked off the table earlier, sleeping restlessly on the white sheets of the shattered vase.

“If it were me... If I were the mastermind, where would I watch this play from...? ...I would slip among the actors, become one myself, and watch as I performed alongside them. That would be most enjoyable...”

“...!”

A heavy silence fell with Len’s suggestion, and time seemed to stop.

The mastermind is among us? Burlet himself...?!

Time, temporarily stopped from fright and tension, resumed with a sigh. Kaito, the oldest, had been raised to become a leader, so he could regain composure from even the most shocking events.

“Your intuition is often correct, so it scares me... But could you tell us what evidence led you to think that?”

“...Sure. When Rin started hyperventilating, and Luka got slapped by Meiko... I felt it. When you put on a good play, a sense of delight and excitement comes from the crowd... something completely different from the excitement from a fight. An emotion full of pure expectation and curiosity... and I’m sure I sensed it coming from somewhere in this room. Though I can’t pinpoint who.”

“It can’t be...! One of us...? One of us was watching this awful discord and enjoying it?!”, Meiko retorted at Len with anger.

“Well... Who knows if they were pleased. But maybe they were enjoying it as a play?”

“...I see now.”

Kaito spoke up with a bitter smile.

“We’ve all been in this together, haven’t we? No such mingling could happen; we’ve been friends for years, and we can still fondly remember our time since meeting to now... That’s undoubtable, is it not?! You’re not suggesting that someone’s been possessed by the ghost of Burlet, are you?”

“Who knows... I just had a hunch of sorts that he was among us. I didn’t say I had solid proof. That’s why I’ve been looking for some.”

“Actually, I’ve thought that myself. The night of the incident, there wasn’t anyone but those of us here now, was there?”

Meg hummed and added her own suppositions.

“If we suppose Burlet is among us, then he would be over a hundred years old...! So for him to just blend in would mean he can change his form at will. But then, determining a person’s personality and past experiences just from their actions would be hard, huh? Which makes it possible that all of that person’s behavior and everything in the real world was just fabricated.”

“But it’s just conjecture, yes? It’s not certain he’s here...”, Meiko insisted, flustered.

“If we can make the conjecture, then it’s a possibility.” Gack spoke chidingly with concern.

“...Maybe just like we’re fooling *Miss Miku*, he could be fooling us too.”

The cutting words hit me like a knife in my chest. At once, I was torn away from the play I was watching unfold before me, back into *reality*.

All this time, I'd yearned for a voice to finally say my name - but as soon as I heard it, the faint light of hope I saw went out. The fearful possibility I kept out of my thoughts as soon as it popped up... that everyone else was leaving me out, and tricking me... That terrible idea was now confirmed as reality. "Miku, you lack insight. Miku, you're honest and easy to fool... So you'd be a good audience member" - it was just as I'd been told.

I mixed in with the comedy they were putting on, and thought I'd become an actor on the same standing as them. But that foolish girl wasn't their friend and colleague, just their audience. And certainly not the star of the show. If they were being fooled by a greater mastermind... What an absurd comedy this was.

"But now we've proven ourselves capable of considering the possibility. Maybe we were able to splash him with some cold water, hm?"

"...No..."

Kaito denied Meiko's bluff with a deep crease in his brow.

"...I'm sure he's delighted deep down. Thinking, "so they finally noticed"..."

Len picked up after Kaito. For the nth time, an oppressive silence

came over the room.

“But... Really, who could it be...?”, Rin mumbled, her head hung low.

Everyone’s faces stiffened, and not wanting to look at one another, focused their ears on the eerie silence. If anyone made a wrong blink, sigh, gaze, gesture, remark... even an irregular heartbeat in this situation would make the other six apprehend them at once. They all strained their senses to endure, like a beast that had wandered into a hunting ground and had to lay low until the humans left; their tension was very evident.

“Everyone’s suspicious... That’s what I think. Of course, you all think that about me too, so your silence is really painful to my ears...”

Meg opened her mouth first. The lover of classical mysteries and writing, who had worked on scripts of her own, was the easiest to suspect at a glance. She was trying to fill the distance before everyone else pointed fingers at her. Meiko looked at her, lowering her eyebrows.

“Sigh... You said it yourself when we sat down for tea. *More often than not, the most suspicious person isn’t the culprit.* I understand that you aren’t, and honestly, I don’t want to suspect anyone. ...Say that the mastermind is among us. Then so what? What does that change? There’s only one ending we seek. That won’t change one bit, will it?”

Meiko lied. What Meg had told her was that the most suspicious person was initially considered to be the killer, but as the story proceeded, those doubts were painted as misdirection. However, it was a common pattern in mysteries that ultimately, even that was part of the plan, and the person thought most suspicious at the start was, indeed, the culprit. I had heard Meiko and Meg's conversation myself. Yes, from behind a door in secret, just like now.

"...My, I hope so," Luka said, eyes seeming to doubt everyone else in the room.

"If there is a mastermind among us, deceiving us... Identifying who it is may not have any impact on their goal, nor *the completion of our objective*. Surely you're well aware of *why that is*, yes?"

Everyone's doubtful eyes suddenly widened, like Kaito's words reminded them of something. Slowly, they turned to unease and fear.

"Yes... Kaito is right. Even if we go hunting down the mastermind, I can't imagine it'll be of much benefit to us," Gack remarked with a distressed tone.

"Hmm... And it's possible our goal and the mastermind's overlap!"

"There's a good deal we've learned, you know. Slowly but surely, we're reaching our objective. With each repetition, we learn more about the rules that govern this play world."

Kaito summed up his opinions to control the situation which could soon turn sour again, and Meg and Gack added their own

persuading comments. Even knowing the mastermind who sucked them into this world could have been among them, they were somehow gaining back their usual team ethic.

Rin raised her head, stood up, and spoke with light in her eyes.

“We’re almost there. We’ve gotten to a pretty good spot. There’s just... *something* we’re missing still... I’m sure of it.”

“Yes, certainly. Our actions are causing minor deviations. If only by a little, *time in the real world is being shortened*. Interference is gradually occurring between that night and this world. But of course, we can’t precisely measure the effect it’s having on reality. Even so, we’ve learned it’s not just futile.”

“True... But I still think we need to avoid slipping up in haste at any cost. We can’t have another mistake like that night again...”

“...Yes, I know.”

The mention of “that night” seemed to change the mood in the room. Their expressions were almost deranged in their seriousness, and the group seemed united under achieving a specific goal. Awed by that impression, my clenched hands started to sweat.

“The important thing is the letter. Rin failed this time. Does someone have a followup plan?”

“...”

“We should act quickly, before time is up again.” Gack stared at his left arm as if checking a watch he wasn’t wearing.

“All right, if it’s come to this... It might be a bit rough, but I don’t care how you do it. Just get the letter.”

“You know, she seems a lot more wary than usual this time. I’m thinking that after *an ending like that*, a few fragments of her forgotten memories of it stuck around, influencing her thoughts. She didn’t even drink my second cup of tea...”

“Ah, that’s right... She completely dodged the collaboration between Meg and I. And since Len went and showed her the past scripts, she’s probably even more on guard now.”

“Well, there’s no time... This night can end BaD too if it means successes next time. It was a dangerous bet taking her into the library then... But personally, I got some good information out of it.”

“But... I’m scared. Hey, Kaito... If it turns out like before again...”

At some point, Rin had returned to Kaito’s side.

“Yes. We won’t let ourselves be killed... The proper end won’t require our deaths.”

“We have to protect *the fact that she died*... and the contents of the coffins. If we can’t do so, we’ll never return to reality. No matter what, *Miku can’t know the truth*. She can’t go back to reality like this.”

“Miss Meiko’s right. *The lead role of this play will die, even if she says and does nothing*. That’s her fate... Because it’s the law of this

world...”

“My, do I feel sorry for her...”

“It’s inevitable if we’re going to *bring her back from the grave*. That’s what our objective is, isn’t it...?”

“Len... You’re right. Yes, we understand.”

“Well. Let’s end the meeting here. She’ll probably be finishing her search of the stockroom and coming up here soon. It’s full of junk, so I’m sure it’ll take some time to search it all carefully, but...”

I was so shocked, I forgot to even breathe, intently listening in on the long conversation.

Thump -

“.....Miku? Are you there?”

The wind outside howled as usual. The branch by the window would occasionally whack into it, making a knock-like sound.

“It seems it’s just the wind. It’s part of the script for the storm outside to get most intense around this time. The climax is approaching... Is it time for the thunder effect...?”

Gack stood looking out the window. But my back was already turned, and I only heard part of his words.

Chapter 10: Solitude

Before my eyes was a mess of mops and furniture that had collapsed upon opening the door, somewhat blocking the entrance. I lowered my heavy head and saw a leg powerlessly thrown on top of the dusty floor. Its right knee was bleeding a little. My own leg... I wonder when I injured it.

My head began to catch up and went back through the memory of what I'd been doing. I lost myself in wanting to get away from that place as soon as possible and ran without any destination, then tripped in the hallway. I lifted my head and straightened my gaze, then looked around.

This was that first storeroom I searched with Kaito... He moved around the old desks, bureaus, mops, brooms, and buckets, leaving them piled up near the entrance. So getting in was fine, but getting out looked like a tight fit. But this was much better than the long gallery I'd entered repeatedly while running around, or one of the guest rooms. On the off chance they came looking for me, it would be hard to find me here.

The first shock came when the Mistress called the Doll Boy "Len," and it merely confused me. I simply wondered, "Wait, why?" But as their conversation continued, my confusion became sadness... and fear... and resentment, and anger. All of my emotions were mixed, and I felt like I was going to burst from them.

Yet, when those emotions peaked, the intensity of them was

suddenly gone, and I began to feel like I was watching a play - an ambivalent human drama swirling with love, hate, intrigue. My mind stopped thinking, and I admired the scene unfolding before me ala a play. How much I wish it were only just a play.

“Ahaha... How cruel...”

My hoarse voice echoed futilely in the unoccupied room.

“Somebody... tell me it’s just a lie...”

I reached out to cling to something and touched only air. I saw a hand in my blurred vision. But it was just my own hand... there was only me. No one would take my trembling hand.

I was sad. Regretful. Pained. Lonely. How miserable. I recalled the conversation I’d heard from behind the door piece by piece, and the intense emotions smoldering in my chest welled up to my throat, and I sobbed. I firmly held my mouth with both hands to keep from making any sound. But even so, my intense wailing that I must have wanted someone to respond to echoed in the empty room, only coming back to my own ears. The more severely I cried, the more hollowness it brought.

I had believed in the others unquestioningly as friends. I expected a hand to stroke my head as I wept all alone, a voice to scold me for crying over something like that, a gaze to gently watch in silence, or delicious milk tea that would calm me, but there was nothing like that... there never had been. The first-class actors who could

manipulate every sense would not offer me such consolation anymore.

I had never truly been a friend to those professionals. I hadn't even been betrayed; I'd just convinced myself that I had already become their friend. Idiotic... What a foolish, miserable, impudent mistake. Not seeing how I could never become a friend to them from the start, I made my own stupid assumption and prided myself on it.

"The lead role of this play will die, even if she says and does nothing. That's her fate... Because it's the law of this world."

Earlier, I tripped in the empty hallway while running. I always tripped clumsily, so I was sure it was just that once again. But I was wrong. Just how many times had I felt the fear of death since coming to this world? The breaking stepladder, the fall down the stairs. Not to mention the sword that came down from above. The milk tea that was offered to me with perfect timing: right after hearing the story about the perfect crime of the well-concealed poison. It all seemed *too* unlucky. But they weren't just accidents; they were all planned, intentional events...

The star actress who suddenly disappeared - taboo words - she who died - the replacement of lead roles - ninth person - the karma of death - necessary death - to bring her back from the grave - *Miku* can't know the truth, or go back to reality - the completion of our objective - the mastermind's invitation - the sudden troupe audition - the dream I saw this morning - First night.

Now, the pieces of the puzzle were assembled... Everything I had felt doubts about finally came together neatly to form a single story.

I had to sever myself from them - from the affection, trust, and bonds I felt. And I had to build resolve to fight against them. I had to think of a way to avoid things going to script, or I would be left all alone in this world to die...

All my sadness over being tricked changed to anger and hate. Just like in that Bad ∞ End ∞ Night. They were fighting, to the point of experiencing temporary death in this fictional world, to *drive me toward the death they desired*. So I would have to be determined as well, and *finish them off before they finished me*. This time, I would have them perform the script I had thought up, without letting them realize I'd noticed the truth - and finishing this repeating play with a last act, the actors would step off the stage to applause.

Kaito said that the letter was important. Most likely, this was the End roLL, like I'd predicted. And using the End roLL, I could create a scene they didn't want - the lead being saved and being able to return to reality. And the things they tried to keep me away from... They were likely related to the usage of the End roLL.

First, the wine bottle. When I searched the wine cellar, there was a single bottle that wasn't fake, with a bit of real wine left. Gack naturally diverted my attention away from the wine. I should have

been very interested in this single non-prop bottle that concealed the potential to be used for something... but before I knew it, he was talking about wine in general, then switched things to an entirely unrelated topic. Maybe this would be the ink. Since when I spilled it on the blank End roLL, it glowed. Now for the other part...

I frantically went around my memories. As I searched for things hidden behind all the actions I'd witnessed since coming here, a particular scene came back to me. Rin was always in the hall, in front of the clock... Yes, the clock hands...! When I tried to approach them, she said it was dangerous, and her eyes threatened against coming any closer... I had to hurry and get those hands!

When I stood up, pain shot up my right knee. I took the handkerchief Luka gave me out of my pocket and wrapped it tightly around my knee. It was faintly soaked with the blood which still hadn't stopped.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. Behind my eyelids, I imagined another me.

She arrived late to their meeting and stepped into the dim room looking very apologetic. Everyone looked her over with some doubt and unease over how very late she was. She, too, looked like she was dying to ask the others something, a little curious about what she'd seen in those books in the library... Slowly, the air in the room grew tense, each party wanting to probe the other... She made a face full of unease, yet trusted them, and approached saying she'd found a hint toward finding the next page. Acting stupidly and

easily-fooled, yes, like an audience member... Her objective was to steal their script.

Yes, I didn't know a thing. Wholly ignorant of being number nine, the pitiful replacement, I would dance for them.

I hid the clock hands in my skirt pocket, held the wine bottle in my left hand, and with my open right, lightly knocked on the door to the study.

"Searching the stockhouse certainly took you a while. We were all waiting for you."

The Mistress sitting on the sofa nearest the door welcomed me with a concerned smile. Only slightly opening the extravagant wooden door, I stepped my foot into the room.

"Um... I finished checking the stockroom a little while ago. But I remembered something when I was searching the wine cellar with Mr. Butler. You said you'd rather drink beer than tea earlier, so I brought some..."

"My, so there's some left! I'm glad."

"...This is no time to be drinking, all right?"

The Master scolded the rejoicing Mistress with deeper wrinkles in his brow than usual. I could interpret it as an expression with some unease; because the Villager had brought the wine bottle, a key to

progressing the story. Coming inside, I went over to the wall on the right... toward the small table with the script. The armchair across from it was empty, so I was able to sit down there in a natural way.

Paying no attention to the script, the Villager looked fidgety about something else - she couldn't help but be curious about the things she heard in the library earlier... but she was pondering how to break the topic. The inhabitants, meanwhile, were likely formulating a plan to steal the letter.

"Oh, did you find the page? Alas, I've had no luck at all. I haven't found so much as a scrap of paper..."

The Lady started things off. The word "paper" was intended to cause a breach.

"Yes, same here! The kitchen had nothing but paper napkins for dining!"

"And the newspapers in the living room all had *things written on them*... Those won't do. To think so much effort would go into finding a single piece of paper..."

"But...! They do SAY things are ALWAYS right under your NOSE! YahaHA!"

I knew that they were creating a natural flow of conversation to obtain the blank letter the Villager had. Starting with the Lady, to the Maid, to the Mistress, to the Doll Girl, they formed a perfect chain with no gaps. The *usual Villager* who knew nothing would surely be enticed by this to say "Oh, if it's a blank piece of paper, I

do have one of those...” and pull out the letter in her pocket.

I only had one chance. To act out, as the uneasy, ignorant Villager... no, as the idiotic Miku who had the role of the Villager, the most natural response...

“I searched as hard as I could too, but... I just couldn’t find it. It’s a little bit depressing... But there’s something I’m curious about... I was wondering, is this letter I have part of the script...?”

“...!”

I slowly produced the letter from my pocket. Their eyes stared with delight. But like hunters reaching for a trapped rabbit, they concealed their true inner joy, putting up expressions of fresh surprise and expectation as if it were the first time game were caught in that trap, then acted slowly and carefully to procure the game without letting it get away.

“I... I didn’t even consider that. Did you have that all along?”

“Yes. I forgot about it, but I’m pretty sure it was always in my pocket...”

I took the folded blank sheet out of the envelope and opened it up to show everyone. They watched me with surprise like they’d never seen it before.

“I saw THAT too, in the HALL! It looked JUST the right SIZE! YAhahaHA!”

“Yes, a PERFECT fit! AhahaHA!”

“There’s nothing on it, huh! Just paper... isn’t it? It looks pretty faded, though...”

“The next page of the script is torn. And rather roughly, so there should surely be irregular tear marks along the inside edge. Indeed, it does seem that the size is just right... But if it’s not the right thing, even attempting to use it as the next page would be dangerous...”

“...! Oh, I see...”

Convinced by Meiko, the Villager complied with her advice, looked down with a bit of despair, and stuffed it back in her pocket like she’d completely lost interest.

Immediately, there was a very slight unrest in the air. “If we take the Villager’s letter, it’ll inevitably lead up to us having to test here and now if it can be used as part of the script or not... That’s also rather dangerous... If we run out the time limit, we won’t need to take it by force, will we?” “We should steal it right now... She still has some unease... Who knows what she’ll do next?” I could see those two viewpoints flying across the room wordlessly.

Not at all noticing this confrontation, the Villager was visibly depressed about her hopeful idea being useless, and while wondering how to ask everyone about what she learned in the library, the Butler spoke to her.

“...Perhaps we should at least give it a try. If only checking whether or not the size is indeed a match.”

The others engaged in a wordless war stared at him in surprise. “Don’t take a risk like that, what are you thinking?”, I could almost hear the Master, Mistress, and Doll Girl scream. Meanwhile, the Lady and Doll Boy kept sending looks that said “Hurry up.” Ignoring the silent blame, the Butler standing by the window picked up the script enshrined on the small table and brought it over to me.

Casually standing up, I rested the wine bottle I was carrying against the back of the armchair, and while placing it carefully to keep it from falling, glanced at the route between myself and the door, confirming the distance. All right, no one there.

“No, hold on. Let’s all take a look at this first...”

The Master strengthened his tone, and with the kind of worried smile one would show to a child not listening to you, came toward me with his long legs. The master of the mansion would never have his expression disturbed and raise his voice over such a minor thing. In hiding his internal worry, his act as the Master was crumbling. Demonstrating no notice of that fact, I took the letter back out of my pocket, and moved my hand to open the envelope. Heavy glances gathered on that hand.

I took it out slowly, bringing it halfway up to show it off tantalizingly. Then...

I slipped it back in and re-sealed the envelope.

In unison, everyone stared in bewilderment, seeming to forget about playing their roles. The time was now - for the Villager to dance out as the lead.

“...No, you’re right. If it’s dangerous, maybe I shouldn’t. Who knows what’ll happen... And I was thinking, the script might have to proceed in the correct way... and this might actually be the End roLL, the last page. If that’s true, we have to find the *next* page, don’t we? Skipping over it and forcing an ending might not end this play properly... and it’ll disappear...”

“Y-Yes...”

I put the letter in my pocket. The Butler stood in front of me, the script laying in his hands, and just blinked, not grasping the reason behind the Villager’s sudden change of heart. But they opted not to deeply question the thinking behind her surprising act; they were confident they’d achieved victory, and relief swept over the room. No doubts, worries, or unease, just relief and a bit of kindness - a nostalgic mood. And...

“Well, I’ll be taking this, okay?”, the Villager said with a smile.

Before anyone could react, I swept up the script in the Butler’s hands - the script held out right before my eyes without any defenses - with my right hand, spun around, grabbed the bottle resting on the armchair, and dashed for the door. I tackled the door left slightly open without dropping speed, turned right down the hall, and sped toward the stairs. So taken off-guard, the others were unable to react promptly; I heard their footsteps quite a

distance behind me.

“Wait! Where are you going?!”

Gack was fast. And he was the closest to me... the nearest to the door. If I slowed down even a little, he'd quickly catch me.

“This is mine! I *am* the star of the play, after all!”

“Miss Villager, wait! I apologize for unsparingly denying your idea!”

“Sigh... Enough of the act. I know everything! Your plotting... and the person you killed!!”

“?!”

As I reached the corridor and was about to hurry down the stairs, Luka shouted in a way resembling a scream.

“Wait, please! Stop! Calm down! What in the world are you saying?! Gyaaah, dooon't!”

“I'm the ninth person - someone's replacement, right?! ...She was going to be the lead... But she died, so I became her stand-in! And now you want to kill me to revive her, don't you?!”

“...?!”

Their voices repeatedly calling to stop me came to a halt. I couldn't afford to look behind me. Only footsteps racing down the hallways echoed off the large hall's ceiling, further fostering this air of bloodthirst. My nonstop sprint soon had me panting. Such a huge mansion...

Down on the first floor, I turned left, opened the door to the hallway behind the stairs, and made sure to shut it tight. I ran straight down the long hallway to my right. Slightly afterward, I heard someone opening the door I'd just closed. It's okay, at this distance... I can get away...!

As soon as I was about to flee to the basement down the spiral stairs behind the Twilight ∞ nighT painting - somehow, Kaito, Rin, and Len were already there waiting for me. I quickly put the brakes on my full-speed legs.

"It's too bad, Miku," Rin said, looking like she actually did feel something was unfortunate.

I was sure I'd taken the shortest route from the second floor study to the first floor's forbidden room. Before coming to the study, I even checked all the passages, and simulated it repeatedly in my head...!

"Remember the forbidden room up above you and I searched? Yes, it too has a Twilight ∞ nighT painting hanging outside it, exactly like this one..."

"Pant... pant... No way...!", I muttered, breathing heavily. But the others who arrived before me weren't out of breath at all. Because....!

"The secret stairs don't only go from the first floor to the basement. However, the stairs from the second floor to the first can't be

opened from the first floor side...”

Kaito glanced behind him. I looked back there, and sure enough, there was a staircase leading up where there had only been a wall earlier. I completely overlooked it. Thinking about it, I should have noticed the possibility immediately. Argh... Still catching my breath, I glared at the three.

“...If we’ve been found out, oh well. Still, you certainly did trick us with that hastily-made act. We were thoroughly fooled... Bravo, number nine.”

“Gh...”

Len no longer had the cruel Doll Boy’s unperishing smile, and was back to his usual blank expression that made it difficult to read his thoughts. The footsteps in the distance got louder; one set came to a stop, then two more. Then, considerably later, the last person arrived. All seven surrounded me.

“Gasp... pant... I caught uuup!”

“Sigh... Meg! You really are unathletic. So slooow.”

“Y-You too, Miss Luka! Pant, pant... aren’t you out of breath too?!”

No one tried to take the letter, script, and wine bottle right away. Keeping their distance, they seemed to still be working out a strategy. I had my hands full with the script and bottle, so I couldn’t easily take the letter out of my pocket. But wary after having been tricked already, they surrounded me with a solid formation, and it seemed they could subdue me at any time. I would have to look

closely to make an opportunity. I had to focus my senses, and put on an act as subtle as putting a thread through the eye of a needle. First...

“I can’t help feeling regret” - I was one step from being taken into their hands. *The idiot Miku* bit her lower lip, but trying to keep her composure, silently observed her foes’ next move.

“...Well, what now? We’ll sacrifice you, and exchange your death with hers - indeed, *the woman I told you about then*. You remember, yes? We all worked so hard to hide it. Our dear friend, lost before you joined the troupe... our star actress, suddenly gone... It rather piqued your interest, didn’t it? Your intuition’s quite sharp. It was planned for her, not you, to be the lead in Crazy ∞ night. And to bring her back, we’ve tried to kill you again and again in ways made to look like accidents... as you’ve learned. And until your death succeeds in the way this world desires it, the night will repeat endlessly.

“But what will you do, knowing that? By the laws of this world, the fate of her death is attached to you, which makes it easier for accidents to occur. Firmly-held swords will suddenly fall, stepladders will abruptly break, you’ll fall down the stairs, you’ll trip on nothing. Furthermore, you’re of entirely average intelligence and ability. Versus the seven of us: sharp, capable, professional actors with far better insight than you. The odds are stacked against you.”

“(There’s one of us who’s clearly inferior in physical ability, though...)”

“(M-Miss Lukaaa...!)”

“...”

I hated to admit it, but I couldn't reply; it was all true. I naturally tightened my grip on the wine.

“Hah... Didn't I tell you, that night? You have a fatal lack of insight. You don't understand your own worth. You're so wrapped up in yourself, you don't at all notice how others see you, their true feelings. So others can easily trick and exploit you. Well, you reap what you sow.”

“...I know that!! I know so much it hurts... I understand the advice you gave me. You pretended you were letting me be less formal and more friendly with you because you accepted me... but it was just to fill me with relief and affection so I wouldn't doubt you, wasn't it? And... all of you, you opened your hearts to me right before and after act one. It was my first play, I was the lead, and for you, it was a play more important than any that couldn't fail... I thought you showed me concern and gave encouragement to help me make it succeed. But even that was just preparation to ensure that when I was sucked into this strange world, I would trust you as friends and wouldn't try anything funny...!

“Preparing a sacrifice and exchanging her for my dead predecessor... I don't know what kind of magic can do that, but it must be the work of the person who created this bizarre world. So you conspired to ask Burlet... no, you made a deal, didn't you?! You'd put on an amusing show for him to enjoy, and he'd revive the

real lead in exchange! It all started when I was picked for the audition... No, earlier than that, when you suddenly put out the audition for a stand-in. Because a total novice, an average girl with no redeeming qualities, would never be picked by the Burlet Company for the lead of his lost play! Anyone could figure that out with a little thought... I could never be the lead! Ahahahaha hahahahaha...!”

“...”

Miku’s deranged laughing made everyone hesitate a little. There was nothing funny about it... but her dry laugh wouldn’t stop.

“...Ahh. I looked up to you all that time, barely managing to go to the theater daily on the wages from my job... until just half a year ago. It wasn’t long ago, but it’s already so nostalgic... I was chosen to join the troupe, and I worked myself to death trying to quickly catch up and meet your expectations... But it was all useless... No, it was never necessary from the start... because I was just a disposable replacement.”

I mumbled out these words like I was telling them to myself. The quiet rain of tears became a small river, then increased in volume to an audible stream. The negative emotions wouldn’t stop until they’d cried a sea.

“Yeah... I’m just a replacement! Number nine, her replacement, stupid, miserable, and pathetic...!”

“...That’s right. You understand yourself well, huh?”

“Len! Don’t talk like that... Hold on a moment, Miku. You have it

wrong. We're really not doing this because we want to..."

"It's useless to smooth things over now, Meiko. Her eyes are verrry scary. She's found us out, so what's the point in hiding anymore? Yes, you're just a stand-in. Didn't I tell you before? The one who we did everything with, but suddenly left us... Yes, she died... In the theater, shortly before you joined. Pitiabile, isn't it? It was because we cornered her... So we fiercely regretted her death. And then, a miracle occurred. We found we could bring people back by using someone else as a substitute... so we're trying to do it for her. And you... were picked as the sacrifice for it. That's the truth. Have all that?"

Luka's words stabbed me in the gut. The truth was thrust in front of me, and I understood it well enough, but my heart wasn't ready for the impact; my vision misted up with tears, and it got harder to breathe.

"...Oh, Miss Luka, you're being excessively harsh... Look, I'm not going to try and make excuses, but we didn't particularly enjoy tricking you, Miss Miku. At least believe that, okay?"

"..."

"When you say it like that, Meg, it kind of sounds like you're making fun of her."

"Miss Rin is right. You're inviting misunderstandings, Miss Meg. Causing unneeded trouble once again..."

"So, yes, you must realize. There's not even any time left. No matter

what, you lose.”

“Haha... Come to think of it, Len... You gave me blue roses. You wanted to revive her no matter what. So was the meaning of those flowers your way of implying you entrusted me with a miracle... with her revival...? Did you love that dead girl, I wonder?”

“...!”

The stream gradually settled, stabilizing to a calm, smooth surface. Sticking my head out of the water, it was moved only by slight ripples; the undulating was coming to an end. Now - time to make some waves.

I gently put the wine bottle on the floor. A moment after everyone looked down toward it, I took out the clock’s hour hand - the knife - concealed in my pocket, and ran over to the wall of a T-intersection in the hallway. Then I turned around. From this position, everyone was standing in the same direction. A moment after I broke free of their encirclement, Luka and Meiko formerly behind me hurried to the hallways left and right of the intersection, trying to surround me again.

“Miss Luka, Miss Meiko! Don’t move!! If you come closer...”

For an instant, everyone was astonished. Holding the script under my left arm, I reached out toward Rin - the nearest person - restrained her, and pointed the sharp, glinting edge of the clock hand in my left hand toward her.

“I’m serious. No one come any closer!”

An eerie silence dominated the scene. Everyone must have known the hour hand of the clock in the hall was a knife.

“...That’s useless. Rin’s a doll now. It won’t do any good...”

“We’ll just have to see if it’s useless or not, won’t we...? Heehee.”

With a creepy grin, I gazed at the others. The small doll in my hand was trembling slightly, and I could feel her pulse.

“You’re shaking... Unfortunate, huh, Rin...?”

“Stop! Miku, please! Let go of Rin!”

“When you’d kill me without a care...? Ahaha.”

“...!!”

“I’ll be taking that wine bottle, too. I was supposed to drink it during act one.”

Kaito picked up the wine bottle from the floor in his left hand.

“ ... ”

“Kaito...”

“Might you tell us why you need this bottle? What were you going to do with it?”

“...I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you that, do you?”

“...I can’t give this to you.”

“You don’t mind what happens to Rin, then?”

“Kaitooo...”

I put the knife right up against Rin’s face, but Kaito didn’t move. The unexpected situation made a little bit of unease came back. If I tried to take it by force, he might pin me down in return. Without the wine... I couldn’t write the ending. What do I do? I had to think. Calm down...

“Stop with this foolishness, and give us the script.”

Kaito stepped forward to close the distance. To incite more fear in them, I brought the sharp edge right up to Rin’s eyeballs. Tears flowed from the Doll Girl’s glass-like eyes. If she could cry even as a doll, surely stabbing her would cause major pain similar to that of dying in reality, I thought dimly in the corner of my mind. The same pain I’d felt dying repeatedly in this world; I didn’t remember any of those deaths at all, but they did. They remembered it all...

Huge tears poured from Rin’s eyes, yet Kaito continued to approach. Deaths in this fictional world would just be fake deaths... so even if I killed them here, another night would come. So as much as it hurt, they could bear it knowing it was a lie... they wouldn’t even fear death.

It seemed that I, as the lead role, couldn’t be killed properly unless the woman’s death scene from reality were perfectly re-enacted. And they too wouldn’t die from being stabbed with the knife, reviving for the next night. Since their memories remained, surely their fear of death would too, but they knew it was only

temporary... So strong-willed Kaito could endure it and stubbornly proceed forward.

I let go of trembling Rin and turned the knife toward Kaito. But he still wasn't fazed at all. I couldn't hesitate any more. With the knife in my left hand, I tackled Kaito and reached for the wine bottle in his left hand with my right.

Just as it was almost in reach, Kaito lifted his hand up, pulling the bottle away. The red liquid inside shook up, and some flew behind him in a clean parabola. A dull shock ran through my left hand. The knife was stuck in Kaito's right forearm. Red blood danced before my eyes, mixing with the deep crimson of the carpet below.

"YAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Rin screamed. Everyone was motionless, eyes fixed on bleeding Kaito. His face tightened in pain; he faltered and fell on his knee. After a brief moment, time resumed. Slipping to the side of the others running toward Kaito, I ran for the now-unguarded stairs leading underground.

"...Dammit! Wait!"

The Doll Boy responded promptly and chased after me. But going down the stairs, the difference in our steps gradually widened the distance between us. The footsteps slowly got quieter, and I accelerated to reach the door at the end of the long stairs.

Right after heading through the heavy doors I left open, I put all my might into closing them and firmly barred the door with the wooden beam leaning against the wall. A few seconds later, I heard banging on the door behind me. Looks like I made it. Through the door, I could faintly hear their muffled voices. Len and Luka, Gack, then Meg. Rin and Meiko were probably at Kaito's side. If all seven of them tackled it, they might be able to bust it open... It was heavy, sure, but a wooden door and lock weren't reliable. I had to achieve my objective before that happened...

I turned to face the coffins again. The thumping on the door from outside annoyingly continued. But there was something odd. When I listened closely, I thought I could hear that sound from inside the room, too.

The eight coffins were aligned in two neat rows. I came to a stop in front of one, the one placed in the far back. I squatted down and put my ear to the high-quality wood. *Thump, thump, thump* - I could hear a sound inside, like knocking against the lid of the coffin. Was this the same sound, coming from nowhere in particular, I thought I was imagining upon waking up in this strange world...?

Suddenly, an unknown fear welled up in me. Could I really open these coffins? Imagine if a zombie came out and attacked me... The knocking continued like someone was calling for help. I had no doubt; in this coffin was the woman they had hid away... the former lead.

If they sought to exchange her death and mine, I would have to make her body impossible to exchange with. My only option was to make her die again, in this world, for good. I felt bad about it... But to borrow their words, it was inevitable given the laws of this world. So I told myself, scolding my body beginning to tremble. I was about to kill someone. But she was long since dead... Yes, she was really meant to be dead, so it was fine, it's fine... I'd seen plenty of blood since coming here, mine and everyone else's -

Blood...? That's right... Kaito was injured back there. Remembering the fresh blood, I closed my eyes tight to shake away that image from my mind. That was another thing I just had to accept. They had murdered me again and again. Their whole goal was to exchange my death with the woman sleeping in this coffin... It was self-defense, really. I also questioned if a dead person could really be revived using a sacrifice... but I'd already spent all this time sealed in this bizarre world. It wasn't strange to think it was possible.

I had failed to steal back the wine bottle. But after that earlier scene, I had a new idea.

I put my hand to my chest to check the time. There were only about ten minutes left in the play. I'd calm down for a moment. I wouldn't forgive myself for making a mistake now because I was in disarray. If I failed here, all my efforts would be for nothing, my memories would be lost, and everything would begin again from the start. And with them keeping their memories, they'd continue tricking me

with more difficult nights still. Before the birth of the next me... that poor, poor me. Here, this night, I would have to put an end to it all.

I slid the minute hand from my pocket into the keyhole on the coffin. Sure enough... a perfect fit.

As I focused myself to calm down, the banging on the door got louder; it seemed the remaining three - Kaito, Meiko, and Rin - had arrived. They had all started charging at the door together.

“Miku!! Open up!!”

“Hey, please, don’t open that coffin now! We’ll tell you the truth, all of it!”

Smash - there was a sound of glass shattering outside the door.

“Hey, are you listening?! The wine bottle’s in pieces now, and everything inside got sucked up by this absorbent mat. Now there’s nothing left to use as ink. Give up and come out here!”

“Len’s right, Miku! Even if you try to write an ending on the End roLL, you have to do it properly, or time won’t move... It’s impossible to do it this time! Look, I promise! Next night, we definitely won’t leave you out! Pleeease!!

Rin screamed bitterly, and seemed to be crying. Her convincing act made my chest tighten briefly. But I couldn’t let myself be fooled anymore. I had to calm down my shaken mind. I couldn’t lend an ear to their kind words. They had taught me the hard way that my

greatest weakness was being too trusting of anyone, and too easily fooled.

By now, I'd had enough of this strange, sad night.

"No, it's too late. Too late for any of that. Heehee... Ahahahaha hahahahahahahaha!"

I had no idea if I was happy, angry, sad, or joyous. My wounded heart had exceeded its limits. After going through countless, mind-numbing repetitions of the same night, it all came to this scene. My mind forgot it all, but my body, my hand on the lid of the coffin, remembered that long, painful past well, and shook with delight.

I grabbed the minute hand in the coffin's keyhole and turned it left. The click of a lock opening echoed through the dark room. With a shrill creaking sound like a bird's cry, I opened the coffin lid.

"I foound it."

Chapter 11: Truth

On the empty stage, I picked up a suspicious letter that I'd seen glow and read it. Something very startling was written there. My hands trembled, and my pulse pounded loudly. By the time I'd finished reading, the uplifting feelings I'd had were blown clean away. If someone else were here, it would probably look to them like I was practicing for act two tomorrow.

"...No... This isn't true, is it...?"

Everyone deeply admired that magnificent playwright, and surely became actors in the Burlet Company to perform his works. Everyone's passion was the real deal... surely. And yet...

If what this letter said was the truth, couldn't this be considered betrayal, sacrilege against Burlet? Not to mention, I... to them, I was only...! Sadness, anger, despair, hate - newly-budded emotions suddenly took root in my heart. Before I knew it, I was running with the intensity of those emotions.

I have to find out the truth quickly! I need them to tell me this letter is just a lie...!! I went off the stage, ran from the hall to the grand stairs, went up them and turned right, toward green room #1 at the far end. The backstage staff had all gone home to prepare for tomorrow, so no one was around but us, the cast. The only lights in the hallway were faint foot lights. I strained my eyes running through the dim halls, and forcefully opened the door to the green room emitting a slight light.

Slam - with the loud sound of me opening the door, the merrymaking people within the room slowly turned to face it. Meiko with beer mugs in both hands, redfaced but still drinking; Kaito engaging with her; Meg engrossed in conversation, eyes shining with excitement; Len pretending to listen to her; Rin singing, and Luka dancing; and lastly, Gack quietly tilting his glass.

Everyone was celebrating the wonderful success of tonight's play in their own way. No one had even changed yet; they still wore their costumes. I could even see it as a continuation of the highly enjoyable party in act one of the play.

Gack, nearest to the door, who had been relaxing and sipping wine on a three-seater sofa all to himself, noticed my arrival and stood up to greet me.

"You're late. Well, how about a toast to our first day? We've all already started, you see?"

"..."

I couldn't get my thoughts in order on what to say, so I stood there silently, saying not a word. Gack thoughtfully filled an empty glass on the table with wine from the bottle, and urged me to come in.

"Perfectly expected for the lead role to arrive fashionably late. Here's a drink for you. Come, let's have a toast."

The glass I received was full of delicious red wine. I faintly gazed into the red liquid wavering in my hand. My first words would be crucial. They would set the tone of things. But no good lines came to mind. Something concise, that wouldn't shake them, and would take initiative in the following conversation... I desperately thought, but nothing popped up.

As I silently stood there merely holding the glass, noticing my odd behavior, the rest of the group came to stare in my direction. Their kind gazes, filled with anticipation and optimism, stuck in my heart and dulled my resolve. But I had to say it. I firmly shut my eyes, resolutely tipped the glass, and gulped down the swaying redness all at once. My nose was filled with a smell like fresh roses.

"Ahh, here comes our lead role, everyone! Come on over. Why, you down your drinks quick!"

"..."

Finding no fault in me emptying the glass before the toast, Kaito approached me with a drunken red face and a good-natured smile.

"Can we get a word from the lead role, too?"

Everyone turned toward me and gathered around. Act one had only just ended, but everyone was brimming with joy like they had the blessing of the Muses of the arts themselves, and had faces of relief. Not a hint of doubt, deep relief and delight... I would have to bring ruin to their fabricated happiness.

“...Won’t you tell me the truth?”

My first line, after much agonizing. No beating around the bush. I would get right into it.

“The truth...?”

Happy drunken Kaito smiling at me opened his eyes slightly, then blinked two or three times.

“This letter... tells about the truth of this play.”

As I said this, bringing the letter in my left hand up beside my face, the air in the room froze. Keeping the exact same smiles they’d had moments ago on their faces, everyone in the room stared at me. Not changing emotion, not even blinking, just holding their breaths, they remained still and questioned what my next action would be. After a considerable silence, Meiko slowly put her beer mugs down on the table and spoke.

“Tell me, whatever do you mean by... the truth?”

In contrast to the casual nature of her words, her lips stiffened slightly.

“It has to do with us... making this script into a play.”

“And? What exactly would this be?”

“...Please, don’t play dumb. It’s all written in this letter.”

I suddenly turned left to glance at the white letter I held in my hand.

“Where exactly did you get it?”

“It was left on the stage.”

“Well, then... Just what does it say? May I see that for a second?”

Kaito took on a stern look quite unlike before, put down his mug, and slowly approached me.

“I believe you’re familiar with it, so I shouldn’t need to show it to you! ...If what this letter says is true, then isn’t this production considered “sacrilege” against him?”

”!”

The moment I spoke the word “sacrilege,” everyone but me trembled with nervous looks. Seeing this reaction, I knew what the letter said was true. I hadn’t had a doubt in my mind that this was paradise, yet I felt like the ground I thought so solid was giving out from under me. Despair... a feeling of being tossed down into the pits.

Unable to bear it, I felt something coming up my throat. I brought my hand to cover my mouth and keep it in. Not wanting to look any of them in the eye, I slowly averted my gaze and hung my head.

“...So it was true... I feel... so horrible. And why did...”

Why did... you trick me, and try to pin the crime you committed on me...?

I couldn't voice that line. In my head, I knew I should have asked them that right away, but I was afraid of saying it and having it confirmed as the truth. The truth that from the very beginning, they never thought of me as anything more than a convenient, disposable pawn...

It was written in the letter. It spoke of their intent to put all the responsibility - the sin of this play, this sacrilege against Burlet - on the lead actress, Miku, to say it was all done by her. They'd say that it was a plot to escalate myself as an actress in the troupe - to profane his script, keep silent about the truth, deceive them and the world, and rise as a breakout star. That was their fallback if the truth about the sacrilege became known: to say it was all plotted by me alone.

I opened my mouth, wanting to confirm it, but hesitated to speak the words. I was afraid to hear it from their mouths.

"...It simply happened this way. Please understand... We -"

"I don't want your excuses! I don't think it's too late yet. Please, you have to announce the truth to the world! If we do it now, it might not be too late. I'm sure... No, I'm certain we can do it over!"

"What are you talking about?! On what basis? The moment we revealed the truth, don't you see it would be the end of us and this troupe?" Meiko approached me, face filling with anger.

She was the most tenured of the group, so she was surely the most concerned about the troupe's future. Still, I was shocked that she had immediately denied me, and turned away from her blaming gaze.

"Who could've written a letter like that? Must be one of us, right...?"

Len, lounging on a single-seat sofa, looked around the room as if conducting a search. But no one confessed. As Len opened his mouth to continue the search for the culprit, Meiko interrupted to continue where she left off.

"That doesn't matter right now. What's important is that we can't allow the truth in that letter to be made public. You understand?"

"...Really, won't you reconsider? We're all friends in this together, aren't we? You're no exception."

Friends... To them, it was half a year at most. To me, it was an irreplaceable six months in the troupe and with the cast I had aspired to for so long as a fan. To stand on the same stage as them... Until just now, I thought a longtime dream had come true. But it was all make-believe, as this letter made me realize. I was little more than a marionette convenient for prolonging the company. I was scared to see Kaito's face as he said "friends"... I remained silent, unable to look at them.

"Yeah! If you do something like that, it'll be real bad... Hey, reconsider! Pleeease!"

Rin, worriedly looking between me and her friends speaking, spoke with a whine. Tears were faintly welling up in her eyes. The happy party mood was completely gone, and amid savage tension, attacks on me flew left and right. It rained terribly outside, and the heavy sound of raindrops echoed. I remained silent for a time, staring at the back window, listening but not listening to both the heavy rain and the conflict.

The storm of words passed, and silence drifted in. Everyone had fallen silent, determining that I had no response to their attacks and now pondering their next move. Even as they showered me with criticisms, I still wanted to believe in them. Surely they were just confused about this sudden situation... As was I. So if we could just talk it out, we'd understand how we felt. Having the tiniest hope it wasn't too late, I started up another battle with them.

"Um... Please, listen! This is really... I really mean it, this will be for the good of the troupe. I thought of the perfect way to go about this! But there are reasons why I can't tell you the details yet. But still... It'll definitely work out okay!"

"There can't be any recovering once the world knows about what's in that letter you picked up. All our dreams, all our hopes, gone. It'll be the end of us all..."

"That's not true! Please just believe me... Please!"

Kaito, still looking concerned, folded his arms in thought and looked away from me.

“Weeell, can’t you tell us those details or whatnot? I wanna know, y’know, the chances of success.”

Meg went to push up her glasses, then blinking as she remembered she wasn’t wearing them currently, let her gaze waver around the room to hide her mistake.

“Well, I... I can’t do that yet...”

I gripped the bracelet on my left wrist with my hand. If this were really an antique of Burlet’s, like my grandmother said... maybe I could make do by selling it. It was one of Burlet’s possessions, and while the color had decayed over a century, it was one of his favorite accessories which he wore all the time. Even in the surviving portraits of him, this once-beautiful bracelet was depicted in a way that demonstrated its former brilliance. So no doubt, it would sell for quite a large amount.

But on the off chance it was a fake... I didn’t want to doubt my grandmother, but the bracelet I wore was very old, and I had no decisive proof of it really being Burlet’s. I couldn’t claim with certainty whether it was real or not until I had an expert on antiques examine it.

Besides, could I really let go of such an important memento of my grandmother...? No, I couldn’t afford to hesitate over that. I had to make up for the crime of profaning Burlet and deceiving the world. I had a duty to protect his history, too. On her deathbed, my grandmother left me this bracelet and a mission to preserve his

legacy - at first, her parting words merely surprised me. But if they were true, then as *one who carried his blood*, I had to protect the history of my great predecessor.

My grandmother told me to use the bracelet whenever I was troubled. All right... this must be the real thing. But more importantly, I had to negotiate with the theater managers and sponsors to see if they would accept this plan I'd thought up. How would that fare, I wondered... I might be able to make it work on the money side, but it likely wouldn't be happen overnight. At worst, it could take months.

Still, I had to take the risk. As long as we believed in the strength which got us this far, then this would be the only way to protect the Burlet Company in any *true* sense.

"Yet... So you mean, you'll be able to someday?", Gack questioned pointedly as I hectically pondered.

"Just give me some time. Then..."

"Just a little time and you're *sure* you'll manage, eh?"

Meg added on another question. Her eyes told me they wouldn't accept any answer without it being "certain."

"W-Well... I won't know until I try... I need to confirm some things... I can't say it's certain right now, but!"

Meg twisted her neck. "Uhh..." She looked doubtful of my answer.

“Well then, you can’t possibly ask us to believe you without reservation...”

“But I... why...”

Meiko, who I thought would be the one most on my side, kept denying everything I was saying, and it pained me every time. I hung my head sadly, and this time Luka, who had been silently watching us converse, sighed, stood up, and glared at me with a piercing gaze.

“Why, you ask...? Are you trying to claim you’re in the right here? You’ve seen all that we put into getting this far, haven’t you? How badly do you think we’ve sought this chance? “I can’t say anything now, but we can try it again someday” - what a dream. No one would believe such a selfish claim.”

“...True. It’s unfortunate, but if you can’t offer us anything worth trusting, there’s no way. We didn’t get this far on half-hearted resolve... This isn’t a game, you know?”

Meiko added on to Luka’s cross-examination, and I was overwhelmed by their threats. But I had to build up a tiny bit of courage and reply to them; I couldn’t lose here.

“...I understand. But I keep telling you, all I can say right now is to believe me!”

“It just figures a girl like you who’s hardly struggled in her life doesn’t know the meaning of “being cooperative.” No experience, ignorant to the true harshness of the world... What a pathetic

softy!”

“I... I never meant... It’s true, I don’t have much of a track record, but I’m doing my best...”

Luka’s words cut deep into my heart like a knife. What she was saying... was all true. I was still a know-nothing novice, always causing trouble for the rest. Even in tonight’s show... If it weren’t for them carrying the weight, I would have ruined everything. I didn’t intend to dispute that fact. But I did intend to try my best to catch up to them. By no means was I trying to disrupt everyone’s teamwork and get in an argument here.

Maybe these were Luka’s usual methods. Like earlier... Her words were harsh and cutting, but she always left a path to her heart. I gently grabbed the top of my skirt, so that no one would realize I was squeezing the handkerchief Luka had just given me.

“Can’t you think it over once more...? Please! There’s still...”

“We keep telling you, we’re not going to believe anything if all we have is your feelings! You’re a real blockhead, aren’t you?! Sounds like you just want to abandon us right at the end, hm? Traitor!!”

“...!”

I’d desperately tried to conceal how effective their harsh attacks were, how hurt I was. For myself, and for them. Yet the moment I heard the word “traitor,” my last little foothold crumbled, I plummeted into dark despair, and I hit the bottom.

In the eerie silence, rolling thunder roared, and lightning

illuminated the others' stiff, angry faces. I closed my eyes and focused my thoughts. My battle with them wasn't over yet. I encouraged myself, telling myself it had only just begun.

Not to worry; I'm not alone. The will Burlet left behind flows in my body. He absolutely wouldn't want this. If he saw this situation, he would certainly grieve. I had to do something. After a short contemplation, I slowly opened my eyes, then my mouth.

"I understand. Then I'll send this letter to the tabloids."

Sharp glares fixated on me. Their mouths hung open in surprise.

"At first, I thought I could just wait until after all the performances, and present it at the final curtain call. Because I thought that might still be in time. But, no... It's too bad. And I asked you to believe me, but none of you would. I have nothing more to say to you. Thank you for everything. Goodbye!"

I quickly turned around and made a break for the door behind me. The others shortly followed after me, shouting things to make me stop, giving chase. I didn't look back, running as fast as I could through the dark, unlit building. The tears I'd been holding in now flowed like a waterfall, blurring my vision.

"Wait! Hey, wait!"

"You two, take the east stairs and cover the front and back entrances! The rest of you, split up and search the second floor. Call the others when you find her. The lights are down, so she couldn't

have gotten far!”

“Got it!”

“We’ll go down!”

With Kaito’s directions, the chasers scattered. From the voices, it seemed Rin and Len were going down. If I went downstairs now, I’d surely be quickly caught by them, with their smarts and good reflexes. Everyone shouted my name loudly. Rin’s voice was slightly cracked; maybe she was crying. Even though I was the one who should have been pained and hurt. I glanced outside, and saw the light rain had become a torrential storm.

I opened the door to the storeroom on the edge of the second floor, went inside, and carefully shut it to not make any sound. My rapid breathing caused by the crying was hard to get back to normal. Holding in tears, I slid my hand down to my pocket, gripping the handkerchief tightly. I felt the soft cloth, and a hard metal.

Tap, tap. I sensed someone walking close to me. They came right up near the door.

“...Say, are you there?”

”!”

It was Meiko’s voice. Maybe she’d heard my sobbing. It would be bad to stay here... I took my chances and quietly stepped toward the door... Okay, no one right behind it. I swung the door open and sped down the hall again, going right past stunned Meiko.

“Hey! She was up here! The second floor foyer! She’s headed for the grand stairs!”

I heard the others, heeding Meiko, heading toward the grand stairs one by one. Going down the stairs would take me right to the hall... but in no time, the hallways surrounding the stairs were filled, and my escape routes all around were blocked. I was alone on the landing, keeping my distance like an animal surrounded by hunters. A wall behind me, the stairs in front - Rin and Len downstairs, Kaito, Meiko, and Gack on my left, Meg and Luka on my right. I couldn’t escape.

“Now... Enough running. We haven’t finished talking yet. Let’s go backstage.”

Kaito took a step toward me.

“Stay away...! I’m serious. Don’t come near me!”

The moonlight from the large window in behind made the beautiful gold knife glint, and I squinted my eyes from its radiance. The rain had now stopped. I thrust out my left arm with the knife - the hour hand of the clock I myself had broken - turning to point it at Kaito. Gasping echoed through the hall. Kaito stared, and his Adam’s apple twitched. The clock hand’s sharp edge shined eerily in the moonlight. To think I would have to turn to this... I really was like a cornered animal. I noticed those tears that had flowed from my eyes had stopped.

While Kaito seemed frightened of my desperate threat, quickening regaining his composure, and demonstrating that such a thing wouldn't scare him, he slowly took a step... then another toward me, closing the distance. His cocky gait was almost predator-like.

I stepped back toward the center of the corridor with each of his steps forward, but I had nowhere to run. Looking back, I saw Luka and Gack furrowing their brows and blocking the path. As for going downstairs, I looked down the grand stairs to my right, and saw Rin and Len already in wait at the foot of them. My hand began to tremble slightly.

In a moment of negligence, the letter in my right hand, perhaps slipping away from the sweat, went fluttering down the stairs. Down below, Len carefully watching the others in silence snapped it up.

“We’ve got the letter!”

“I... It’s pointless! Disposing of that letter won’t change the truth!”

I tightened my grip on the knife by putting my empty right hand on it as well. No choice. I had to use this threat and run down there. Rin and Len... If I made a feint of pointing the knife at Rin, Len would likely panic and protect her... I’d use that opportunity. I turned the sharp point straight toward Rin downstairs. Her eyes widened, and she shuddered with fear.

“...!! Wait! Calm down! We can talk this out!”

Realizing my expectation, Kaito suddenly broke into a run and lept toward me. I was too slow to thrust the knife out, and he grabbed it in his large hands. But I couldn't have the knife, my last defense, stolen from me now.

"Drop the knife!"

"No!"

I desperately shook my hands left and right to shake him off. Slowly, the others on the upper floor began to enclose on the two of us. Kaito yelled at them not to come any closer, as it would be dangerous if the knife flew off in the struggle.

"Let go! Somebody...! Help!", I shouted frantically.

Maybe the audience members were still waiting outside. If someone heard the clamor and came inside...

"Ooh, this isn't good. If someone comes by..."

"Come now, just calm down!"

"No! Somebody, HEEELP!"

"It's too dark to see a thing! Please, enough of this dangerous nonsense!"

He's going to push me down at this rate! I temporarily weakened my struggles and stopped resisting. At the same time, Kaito slightly weakened his grip on me. I took the chance to forcefully swung my body left. Unintentionally released from my hand, the knife sliced

through his right arm, spewing a parabolic line of fresh blood. His face contorted in pain, and he faltered. I shook him away -

“YAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Rin down below screamed. I turned to my right and looked down, and saw Len desperately holding to the hand of Rin trying to run up the stairs and help Kaito. Len was busy holding back a panicked Rin... Now was my only chance. I put out my right leg to run down the stairs, but a moment later, Kaito grabbed both my wrists. With only his unhurt left hand, he tried to again immobilize me.

The stairs behind, and Kaito in front one-handedly holding both my wrists, I couldn't even budge my hands gripping the knife. We had a tug-of-war, but I found myself being slowly brought closer to Kaito. I saw Gack, Meg, Luka, and Meiko tensely and carefully approach Kaito from behind to provide him assistance.

“Give up... Come with us!”

“No... No!”

“Why?! Let's just talk... Then we'll...”

Even after I'd pointed a knife at him and wounded him, those eyes I looked at head-on seemed to still trust me, and have deep sympathy. My heart raced. Why was he making such a face at a time like this...? Was this just another convincing act to tame me? I knew I couldn't be swayed and tricked, but for some reason, once again I... My closed tear ducts flowed again.

“...Who’s the real traitor here?! I... I don’t want to trust any of you anymore!”

Kaito shook with surprise. For a moment, the force in his hands slackened. And my hands desperately pulling backward were left with nothing to be pulling back against.

“Miku...!”

His large hand reached out in front of me. Four more hands reached from behind.

I met eyes with Kaito, whose couldn’t be opened any wider. Reflexively, I thrust my hands, still holding the knife, out toward him. But I came just short of slicing anything but empty space.

The brief moment of falling down the stairs seemed to play out in slow motion, like being eternally subjected to a scene from an everlasting nightmare. I don’t know if I felt any pain or such. As my senses faded, I only heard the sound of applause.

She lay face-up at the bottom of the stairs. Her eyes were hollow, and the tears around them gleamed in the moonlight pouring through the window above her. Plunged deep in her chest was the golden knife she wouldn’t let go of to the very end.

Applause seemed to echo from somewhere, like it were a scene

from a tragic play. Everyone stared at the horrible sight dumbfounded. There was a silence like the world had come to a halt around Miku's unmoving body. The moment felt like eternity.

"YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!"

"NOOOOO! W... What is this...? Tell me, what is this...?!"

The silence that could have gone forever was broken by a scream from Rin, followed by half-mad shouting from Luka.

"Miku!!"

"I-It can't be... Miss Miku..."

"..."

Meiko and Meg, followed by Kaito, came running down the stairs. Meiko got down on her knees near the fainted girl and took her wrist.

"Her pulse has stopped..."

"...!!"

Kaito looked at her frozen, at a loss for words. Behind them, Gack supported trembling Luka as they slowly went down the stairs.

"Quickly, we have to take her to a hospital! Her heart may be stopped, but maybe there's still time!"

Rin's head snapped up in response to Meiko, and she ran to the front door.

“I want to try CPR, but who knows what will happen when this knife is removed... But we have to try... It’s too dark in here!! Someone, turn on the lights! And someone help me stop the blood!!”

“Got it!”

“I-I’ll help...!”

Len briskly nodded to Meiko’s instruction and ran down the hall. There was only the moonlight to go on in the dimly-lit building. Meg sat down beside Meiko, faltering slightly.

“It’s not your fault, Kaito... She lost balance... It was an accident...”

“...”

“And we can’t give up yet! Meg, there’s a handkerchief I don’t use in my pocket. When I pull the knife out, hold that firmly to the wound. I’ll take over right after.”

Meiko, who claimed to have a little bit of medical knowledge, nervously touched the knife in Miku’s chest. She took a deep breath and slowly removed it. Meg stooped over the body, averted her eyes slightly, and prepared for the blood that would pour out.

The knife smoothly came out all the way. But strangely, no blood came out of the left side of Miku’s chest. In fact, once the knife was fully removed, there wasn’t even a trace of the wound, nor her clothes being cut through.

“What’s going on...? No blood came out... Her clothes aren’t even damaged... This isn’t just a toy knife, is it?”

Kaito stood there stunned, and timidly grabbed the removed knife. To test, he touched the end of his pinky to the blade, and it faintly bled fresh blood.

“...Did we see it wrong? I’m sure I saw it stabbed near Miss Miku’s heart...”

“It certainly was... I have good eyes. I couldn’t have mistaken... that...” Luka spoke weakly from behind Meg, still shaking.

“...! Her heart?!It’s stopped!!”

Meiko tried CPR and artificial respiration. Kaito, Meg, Luka, and Gack watched blankly. Meiko attempted CPR again and again, but Miku lied there totally unmoving.

“Please, please!! Miku, wake up!!”

The remainder of them could only tensely watch Meiko’s desperation. Then Rin, who had run to the front door, for some reason appeared on the second floor and called to everyone downstairs. Her expression had changed; her eyes were open wide, and her face was stiff.

“Pant, pant...! Hey, something’s weird here! There’s no front door! And I thought this was the theater, but... It’s not!!”

Having been distracted by the attempts to resuscitate Miku, everyone finally took a calmer look at their surroundings.

“Strange... Surely we were in the theater when we left the green room to go after Miss Miku...”, Gack muttered with a sullen look.

“The lights in the hallway were out, so it was hard to see, but there’s no mistaking we’re in the theater! I could close my eyes and still make it to the room I was headed for!”, Luka yelled, her unrest very evident.

“So then when...?”, Kaito asked, regaining some of his composure and looking all around and behind.

“Well... I don’t know, but I’m sure that this isn’t the theater. Just look out the windows! The theater’s smack dab in the middle of West End, right? There’s no *forest* around it!”

Meg made everyone simultaneously look toward the large window above the landing. Outside, the wind howled through a dark forest of thick trees.

“Well, then where in the world are we...?”

“Hey, I brought a lamp! You’ve probably already noticed, but... This isn’t the theater, and I couldn’t find any light switches... in fact, there’s no electricity. So for now, we’ll use this...”

Len returned carrying a small lamp, and approached Meiko still performing CPR on Miku. Meg, helping out beside her, saw Len’s legs illuminated by the faint light of the lamp, and after a beat, fell on her back with a yelp.

“Eek...!”

“W-What’s the matter with you...?”

“M-M... Mr. Len, y-your, legs...!”

Len looked down at his legs. His knees, which had been trained up by lots of soccer playing, had beautiful round ball joints.

“WAAAAAHHH!!”

“Len! What’s wrong?!”

“What the... What the hell...! M-My body...!!” He was too shocked to finish the sentence.

“No way...! You turned into an actual doll...”

Rin hurried down the stairs and unsteadily approached Len.

“It’s you, right?! You’re Len?!”

“.....”

Len just kept shaking his head, still not able to talk from the shock. Rin started to put her hand to her chest like she was relieved, but her little hand stopped in air, and she slowly rolled up her black dress. The color visibly left her face.

“Me... too...”

“Even Rin...? No...”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Rin’s scream echoed through the hall again. Rin and Len, both in

bodily construction and in size, had been turned into dolls. The same size which they appeared to be via the trick of perspective used in act one... They reached up to about the hips of a normal-sized person. But everyone was too disoriented by Miku's death to notice it right away. Once Miku fell, Rin and Len quickly ran off, and when they were upstairs, a similar perspective trick induced the illusion of them being normal size.

"Miss Rin! Calm down!"

"No, no, NOOOOO!"

"My... body..."

"Could, could this be a dream...? Is it the curse of Crazy ∞ night? Because of what we did..."

"...!"

Everyone went silent at Luka's words. "What we did"...

"Because of us... Rin and Len turned into dolls... And we were taken to this strange mansion in the woods... A mansion just like the play describes. And Miku, who tried to condemn us for what we did, died..."

All fell silent. Even Meiko's hands repeatedly attempting CPR had stopped. Just then, something shined in the dark hall. From on top of an old wooden table, placed beside a clock right at the edge of the hall after coming down the stairs.

"What's that...?"

Kaito slowly approached the suspiciously-glowing object.

“It’s...!”

He delicately picked the object up in his hands and turned around. His large hands were holding a book.

“Crazy ∞ nighT...”

The cover indeed said, in faded letters, “Crazy ∞ nighT.” A faint pale light like a crescent moon poured out from it. Kaito slowly opened the book. And he read the contents aloud for the others to hear.

““Prologue”...”

“...”

““What a strange thing! They were inside the play, and made to act it out!””

“Huh...?”

Now, we find ourselves at the entrance to a certain story’s world.

Let this narrator tell you a tale.

In a quiet, rural village, there lived a girl.

She lived together with her grandmother. From a young age, she had no father nor mother.

She distracted herself from her loneliness by filling her thoughts with imaginary worlds.

Her grandmother, seeing her do this, one day took her to see a play.

There, the dream worlds she had imagined all alone appeared before her with such realism.

Beginning that day, she became entranced by theater.

And soon enough, she came to dream of becoming an actress herself.

When the girl was fifteen, her grandmother passed away.

Now, she was left without a single relative.

No sooner had sadness come upon her than she left the village.

To fulfill her promise made with her grandmother... to realize her dream of becoming an actress.

Throwing herself into bustle of the big city, the girl toiled away.

In the time between work, she daily went to the theater... to see the Burlet Company she so aspired to.

One day, a miracle happened in that troupe.

A script that had much historical value to the troupe was found.

It was Crazy ∞ nighT, the script referred to as Burlet's lost libretto.

The news spread like wildfire around the world, and an audition was held for the lead part.

And by *pure chance*, the girl was chosen in the audition.

What a *miracle*... She joined the troupe, and began practicing furiously.

After much difficult practice, it was finally time for the main event.

She assumed her lead role, became the Villager who wandered into an eerie forest one night...

She was "appraised" by the strange inhabitants of a mansion, and enjoyed a "party."

A play that made a magnificent, celebratory night come true.

Act one was received superbly.

And then, intermission.

The girl picked up a letter left on stage after the show ended. It was addressed to her.

There, it said something truly horrifying.

Unbelievably, the lost libretto had been profaned by the seven actors.

Naturally, this was an unforgivable act, a stain upon the company's history, reputation, and dignity.

She felt resentment, sadness, anger, and despair.

And at the end of the letter...

In the event that the seven's sacrilege were to be revealed to the world...

It was written that they would pin the crime on the lead role alone.

"Every part of it was all her scheme...
She did it all to ensure her name would echo across the globe as a miraculous breakout star."

...When she finished reading the letter, she was deeply hurt by her friends' betrayal.
And she thought... How can I right this crime they've committed against Burlet?

The answer she came to was: an apology.
After they performed the play to the end... They would earnestly apologize to the audience.

And her bracelet, a memento of her grandmother...
She would sell the Burlet-related antique, which she treasured nearly as much as her life.
She thought they might be able to raise money for the vast expenses spent on the play, and pay back all those who bought tickets.

But she couldn't know right away whether her idea would work.
She tried to propose the plan to the actors, but they wouldn't hear it, lashing out with attacks on her.

She couldn't fully believe in them... And they couldn't fully believe in her...
They were unable to search inside each other... And thus never exchanged their respective truths...
And it became the trigger to set fate awry.

Failing to convince the seven, the girl was branded as a traitor.

Her meager hope crushed, in the depths of despair, her love and trust became hate and disgust...
She solidified her resolve to fight against them.

But...
The girl died.

Just like that... in the blink of an eye, the final curtain fell on the play she starred in.
The play would no longer be able to go on.
Because the lead was dead...

The seven actors grieved the unhappy death of the lead actress.
And they wished: *let her death be buried away.*
Yes, if only this tragedy were just a scene in a play.

...And then, something strange happened.
Her bleeding stopped, and even the wound had completely vanished...

Was her death stopped...? No.
The scene of her death was excised from reality.

At the same time, they noticed they were now in an entirely different world, one not their own.
Their bodies were no longer their real ones, transformed into those of the characters in the play.
The human roles became human... but the dolls became real living dolls.

The group was in a panic.
Then they saw a glowing script... yes, the one they...

No, the book *you* are reading now.

This is a fictional world born from the event that took place on this night, "her death," being buried away from reality. A play world, where "her death" will be repeated over and over for eternity.

The world inside the script of Crazy ∞ night which they profaned...

Oh, the cruelty...!

We want to escape this crazed world as soon as possible!

We must get back to reality...!

...However, it suddenly occurred to them.

If they returned to reality, then that scene which dodged into a world of fiction in order to vanish from reality...

Would the buried moment of "Miku's death" not re-awaken and occur?

Time resuming would mean reverting the scene's excision from reality.

Upon all returning to reality, the next moment that arrived would be her death... that tragic instant.

Ah, what a conundrum.

If they stayed in this fictional world, the poor girl would escape the reality of her death.

By living in a world where the instant of her death repeatedly circled around...

But she wouldn't know of this repetition.

The memory of her death was contrary to this world where she was alive.

In this world, she would repeatedly be reborn without her memories.

Freed not only from her death in reality, but also from the fear of wandering this world's eternal moment...

She could likely be appreciative for her fabricated life.

But if they returned to reality...

A strict two choices.

Do the actors return to reality, and accept the moment of her death?

Or do they stay in the fictional world, and perform Crazy ∞ night for eternity alongside the lead role saddled with the fate of death?

Which will you choose?

Faced with such harsh choices, your faces must be stricken with fear. Poor you.

You must choose one or the other...

But is there really no other option...?

No one knows the answer to that.

But searching for one could be a bit of amusement.

After all, you do have *plenty* of time.

Even if a mind-numbing eternity passes in this fictional world...

In real time, it is only a brief moment.

When one writes "They spent an eternity there" in a book...
For the author, there is only that one moment of finishing the sentence.

But in the world of the book, it causes that "eternity in a moment" to exist.

Do you understand, now?

An eternally-lasting fiction... It's possible its repetitions could have interference on the real world instant.

This is a play world made from a single moment in reality.
All things... the world is bound by laws of cause and effect.

The connection between reality and fiction is not easily broken.

Even in this world, in lack of anything else, she will be drawn to her coffin.

She is influenced by the reality... guided to the EndinG of death.

But can that influence be obstructed?

There's a *possibility*.

Because this is fiction; a world of lies.

Here, time in the play will pass.

You, the players in this instantaneous world...

You make the time of this play, where she dies in an accident eternally.

But even if a play follows the exact same lines and actions...

It won't turn out exactly the same way.

By the accumulation of repeating EndinGs, irregularities are born, and it exerts an influence on the real world...
For this to be the case... is not inconceivable.
However, it may be a very, very distant dream...

Until, with the passing of ∞ time in the fictional world, a distortion is made in reality...
For how enormous a quantity of time must the same thing be repeated?
And all this repetition can change only a single moment of reality...

Just giving real thought to that hair-raising terror makes me feel like I'm going mad.
Because ∞ is not something humans can understand easily with just a glance at that symbol.
Indeed, it is more than their imaginations can even handle.
That is what makes it so beautiful...

For you to be taken by the madness of this everlasting night, despair, and abandon her to return to reality...
That, too, would be a perfect finish to this magnificent tragedy.
As long as the lead role exists, ∞ many EndinGs can be made to the story.

But "crazy" has a second meaning, does it not?
I am a member of the audience, hopeful that Crazy ∞ night will be *a magnificent, outrageous night*.
I will always kindly watch over your performances.

The scene of her death takes place, in reality, during the intermission between acts one and two.

The Page describing it has already been ripped out, and sleeps in the coffins underground, along with your real bodies.

And this world was created at the same time that sleep began.

Your reality, too, is in an eternal sleep in the coffins.

To return to reality requires waking from that sleep and ending this world stopped in time.

To write on the blank End roLL *the EndinG moment*, to take the stopped, lost reality out of the coffins...

And to take back the buried scene of her death.

And fundamentally, it is the duty of the lead role to guide the story to an EndinG.

So at the start of act two, let us make the End roLL a blank letter, and leave it with her.

Of course, it is entirely up to you what will you do with her letter afterward.

Perhaps this too is an effect from the scene in reality...

To make time tick once more, you must use the clock hands.

There are two hands... Bright ones like yourselves should quickly realize their usage.

Now, I have a piece of advice.

To make this play more interesting... ahem, excuse me.

To better reward you for your brave will to put on this play

for her... a suggestion from the playwright.

This is not an instruction, only advice, so you need not follow it exactly.

It would likely be better not to speak of the truth while she is around.

If she remembered the moment of her death from reality... that would be a very dangerous thing for this world.

She would notice the oddity of being alive when she recalls already dying...

And she would lose sight of her "life" in this world that keeps her alive.

This world is unstable, kept up by a balance of her simultaneous life and death.

Her becoming aware of her death would cause it to be confirmed as reality.

That would cause the absence of the lead from the story.

A story can't do without a lead, now can it?

With order lost, the world would crumble...

Yes, the laws of cause and effect are very delicate.

Terribly ambiguous, brittle, and easy to destroy.

The world is propped up by that single support known as cognizance.

So please, take care that doesn't come to *be*.

Now, as for your memories of the nights you're about to perform.

They will be stored as past performances, each a book in the

library.

Among the many shelves, at present, there is currently only one book.

The events of tonight... First night.

This lost play that I never wrote...

Yes, I'm very much looking forward to seeing what kind of story you'll make it.

I'll be gladly observing, each and every night, to see what Crazy ∞ nightTs you put on.

Currently, we're still in the waiting room during the intermission.

Soon, the buzzer for act two will sound.

Have you come to an answer...?

Oh my, don't you hear that applause, coming from nowhere?

Well, open up that invitation and take a look.

I invite you, the cast, to a strange world where a moment lasts for eternity.

As soon as you open my invitation, into the ∞ play world you will go... ∞

- from the Mastermind

Kaito finished reading the Prologue. Everyone's mouths hung open, frozen like time had stopped. Meg was the first to recover from the shock.

“The “lost play that I never wrote”... the Mastermind...”

“Yes... Indeed, what we did was none other than sacrilege against him... against Burlet...”

After muttering self-derisively, Kaito faltered slightly. Gack quickly came to support him. Kaito only said “sorry,” and fell silent with a gloomy look.

“A fictional world where that event a moment ago was excised from reality to be repeated eternally... And... it’s also the world inside the play of Crazy ∞ nighT... right? And... it hasn’t started just yet, huh...”

Since Kaito was still bewildered and in shock, Meg took his place and began to timidly summarize and analyze the situation, taking control.

“Yes... I can’t imagine what kind of power he used, but... it seems he saved Miku, keeping her away from the reality we didn’t want. That’s why her chest is completely unharmed after being stabbed with a knife... isn’t it?”

Meiko spoke with slight relief that Miku, lying down in front of her, was not necessarily dead.

“But this is a fictional world. We’ve been sealed here forever. And we have to perform as the cast of this play where she’s the lead role, fated to die. While the Mastermind watches the nights we put

on from who knows where...”

“Then... Then will we have to act in this play until we die?!”, Luka shouted in terror upon processing Rin’s line.

“...I don’t think that’s right. As long as we interpret this Prologue just the way it reads... Even our deaths in this world won’t end the play.”

“Huh...? What do you... mean by that, Len...?”

“I mean it won’t end no matter who dies. It says it’ll just keep repeating. It also said that time in the play keeps passing, right...? So there’s a fixed amount of time to perform the play in. In that time, we have to act as the characters of Crazy ∞ nighT. Then when that time runs out, the next performance will start. And we’ll act out the same story again... That’s gotta be how it repeats. And the seven of us will remember all of that. But Miku will forget it each time...”

Len slowly put together his words with eyes shut. Luka went pale as she heard it.

“Act it out...? But what are we even supposed to do? And... if Miku happens to remember falling down those stairs... that she died... this world’ll end...”

The way Rin aired her doubts was just the same as Len: closing off her vision and focusing on her thoughts.

“...”

Everyone went silent to think. They were trying to grasp the situation and determine what to do next.

“So what we did was sacrilege against him... Burlet... the Mastermind. And he was angered... Yes, that’s it, isn’t it...” Luka spoke absent-mindedly, with empty eyes.

“Because we fabricated a lie about finding his lost script... *and made a fake lost play of Burlet’s.*”

Rin hung her head and balled her fists up tight. Her right arm shook slightly. Gently holding her hand, Len spoke, seeming like he was trying to keep something in.

“...Look at this, the letter Miku picked up. It lies... it says that if the world found out about our deception, we were going to pin all the blame on Miku. Why Burlet would want Miku to see a letter like this, and include a lie that aims to push us apart, I don’t know... but it’s clear as day it was set up so that Miku wouldn’t be able to trust us. But even then, she... she still believed in us, and tried to persuade us. And we... didn’t even lend her an ear.”

“It’s all our fault... Miku didn’t know, she had nothing to do with it, she did nothing wrong...! I’m sorry, Miku... I’m sorry...!”

“...”

Meiko held Miku’s head, still on her lap, with trembling hands and screamed. The unending stream of tears from her eyes wetted

Miku's immobile pale cheeks. Behind her, Luka standing there in a daze collapsed to the floor. Her hollow gaze looking out into space, she spoke through large tears.

"Ahaha... It's my fault... I was heartless to her, called her a traitor... I..."

The air was heavy with sadness, regret, and repentance, and there was only the sound of wailing and the intense rain outside. After some time, Meg again managed to be the first to open her mouth and move things forward.

"...Um. So this is a fictional world, not reality, right? Even Miss Miku in front of us is in the play... so then, if reality starts up again..."
"...!"

Everyone gasped. Gack continued on in a pained voice.

"Miss Miku and we have both been sealed in this world forever. However, if everything written in this book is the truth, then *all of us* can return to reality at any time. But when we do..."

Gack hesitated, and the Doll Girl tried to continue from there.

"When we return to reality, Miku will..."

...However, neither of them could bear to say the next word.

"..."

Some looked down with dark, pale faces. Some shut their eyes to focus on their thoughts. Some appeared emotionless, like they weren't thinking about anything. The oppressive silence may have gone on for a minute, an hour, an eternity.

“Ahh... Finally.”

A neutral alto broke the silence. It came out listlessly, but with a hint of cheer. Len, who had been disoriented by the fact of becoming a doll, opened his mouth.

“Finally... we can perform *the real* Crazy ∞ nighT. The dream we always dreamt... as a genuine play made by Burlet himself.”

The others thought about it and looked up toward him. As their gazes landed on him one by one, he wore an intrepid grin. There was no trace of fear or despair left in his eyes.

“Ahh, geeeeeze... Len always beating me to it *again!*”

Rin puffed her cheeks, like a little animal who had them stuffed full of food, and continued.

“It's kind of embarrassing... But I've always really looked up to dolls. In this world, I can be a cute little girl forever! Isn't that pretty great? I mean, anti-aging is an eternal problem for women. Oh, and

miss crybaby Lady? You better stop worrying so much. The stress might add to your wrinkles.”

Rin winked at Luka with plenty of playfulness. Her lively voice called up a wind that blew away the heavy mood, and the despair slowly vanished from everyone’s faces.

“Rin...”

Luka, sobbing on the floor, quickly swept her hand to wipe her tears, and hid her eyes behind long eyelashes. Rin watched her closely with eyes of strong intent. Luka slowly stood up, put her right hand on her hip, and bending her head back slightly, looked down on her - her usual pose. With a bewitching smile on her lips, she shot a challenging gaze at Rin.

“Dear, isn’t it a bit too soon for a little doll to be speaking about anti-aging? Especially such a childish one who’s flat all over.”

“Wha...! And here I thought you’d cheered up, but there you go again, Luka!!”

“What’s that? Well, isn’t it true? And I don’t have a single wrinkle yet!!”

Meg intervened between Rin and Luka as they slid back into their usual attitudes.

“Aheem, Miss Rin! I’ve always had the role of being the droll one who cheers the rest up! I feel like you keep snatching up the scenes where I’d have a chance to shine!”

“Huh?! Well, that’s because... You’re taking over Kaito’s job!”

“Be quiet, Meg! So annoying...”

“You two are just right back to normal, huh... How mean! Look, Mr. Kaito seems pretty glum right now, so I figured I had to be the one to seriously move things along! ...In fact, I’ve been thinking, aren’t I the more charming character?”

Meg assumed a pose of slumped shoulders.

“We’ve returned to the usual hierarchy... Ah, this speedy recovery is truly magnificent!”

“Heehee... It’s good you can cheer up so quickly. Yes, it’s no good to wallow forever... We must be positive now more than ever.”

Gack and Meiko smiled peacefully seeing the three girls back to their ordinary interactions.

“Well, I know what you’re saying, Meg. I mean, *somebody’s* just being such a downer, so I can figure he’s not in the mood.”

“...”

Rin folded her arms and turned toward Kaito with her eyes still closed, then turned to Len. Len sighed a little, then scratched his head and spoke.

“...We’ve basically made our lives on performing Burlet’s plays. For the Crazy ∞ nighT we created... we researched everything about where he lived, came up with an undeniably interesting script...

thought of a perfectly dramatic way for it to be “found”... and almost miraculously, were able to select a lead that would paint it like a Cinderella story. We spared no expense creating a truly dramatic tale. We had regrets about it being sacrilege, and intended to carry the weight of that sin our whole lives... So we can’t regret this perfect story on which the troupe’s revival is riding. Except for one point... that we let her die.”

Len shot an aggressive glance, like an animal ready to jump at any moment, toward Kaito, whose eyes were still closed.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Kaito slowly opened his eyes and spoke.

“Miku... our dear friend... won’t be left to die.”

The leader, who was nearest and felt most responsibility for failing to prevent her death, accepted his mistake and was determined to atone for it.

“You know, Kaito... None of us think you’re at fault. We chased after her in the first place because of that quarrel in the green room. And if you trace it back, it’s rooted in our forging a Burlet script... and the company falling so low as to need to forge a script... Argh, once you start thinking about it, there’s no end to it!”

“You’re right. But as a leader, I have a duty to protect this company,

the culture of Burlet... and all of the troupe's members. And in this world, I'll make up for failing in that duty. And for failing to believe in her..."

"Yes... All of us will, won't we? We'll save her together. You're not alone in this. We'll earn back her trust as well."

"Meiko..."

The seven, regaining their firm unity, began to think about how to save Miku from this world. Kaito, with regained vigor, stood in the center and took back control from Meg.

"First, we must firmly understand the situation. Miku's death scene, the excised moment, should be sleeping in the underground room of coffins. Along with our real bodies."

"...So these bodies are really just fakes, huh? Good. It's not stylish at all to be a shorty doll like this. Though it is pretty interesting being able to turn my neck around."

"Oh yeah! I tried that too. Handy, huh? And it is pretty nice being young forever. Maybe we should submit ourselves to be played with!"

The two turned into dolls, despite having been markedly more worried than all the rest earlier, both joked around between Kaito's instructions. Kaito cleared his throat and spoke again.

"...Listen to me, you two. Now then... When Miku wakes, she'll have forgotten even coming anywhere near death. Then she'll act in this

play as the lead, never knowing about the repeating world, meeting a new night every time. And each time, she'll forget it. Well... that seems better than remembering everything. Like he says, if you think about an infinite span of time, it's hair-raisingly dreadful... But still nothing next to actually dying."

"Each time we do something here, it'll lead toward her accidental death. But Burlet wrote that there might be a possibility of obstructing that, huh?"

"If so, perhaps we seven can be divided up around the mansion to stay at her side and protect her... To keep guard from assigned stations."

"That's a good idea, Luka. It's possible that contact with us will instead make Miku more susceptible to danger... But we can know those dangers in advance, so we'll be able to respond quickly if anything happens."

"Right... We'll have to come up with some other reason to be focusing on her, and make things as safe for her as we can."

"But... How should we act so that Miku won't realize we've been sucked into this strange world with her? Seems pretty hard. Do we just keep pretending we don't know no matter what she asks? ...I don't like it. It'd be like isolating her."

Though usually reticent and not particularly passionate except when on stage, in this state of emergency, Len was actively contributing to the conversation and displaying emotions he typically never did. Luka promptly voiced her agreement with Len.

“I think the same. I’d feel so bad having to keep it a secret the whole time...”

“Suppose we explain that we’re all in the same circumstances. What do you think she’ll ask next? “Why were we sucked into this world?”, and “how do we get out?” How do we explain those? In the real world, we chased after you, and you died... And likely incurring Burlet’s wrath, as recompense to him and you, we were made to perform in a play set just before your death... As soon as we explained the true story, reality would likely kick in again. And say we talk around Miku having died. She’s not that much of an idiot... she’ll surely notice the discrepancies. It’s too dangerous.”

“Yes, that would be much too risky. I’d like to at least fabricate a reason for her why we were sucked into this world... But one slip of the tongue would be the end.”

Kaito and Meiko spoke in opposition to Len and Luka’s opinion. Everyone saw they had to think in the long term and began serious thought.

“How about we act like... we were trapped in this fake script we wrote for Crazy ∞ nighT... and made into part of the play world, not remembering a single thing about reality? So we’ll behave like the parts of our characters... Yes, WE’LL keep putTING on the ACT. If we think OF it as perFORMING a play, maybe we CAN get by withOUT any slip-UPS!”

“...I see. That’s very smart, Rin.”

“EheHEhe!”

Kaito nodded to Rin’s idea, and the Doll Girl laughed happily.

“We won’t make another mistake... Right, Len...? And Luka. It may be hard, but it will be the best way to protect her.”

“...Got it.”

“Well, for me, it wouldn’t be much of a personality change between play and reality. I can just act natural, can’t I?”

“Um... That’s kind of obvious! We intentionally made the script with characters similar to our roles to make it easier to act out!”, Meg quickly retorted to Luka.

“If we seven are going to be the characters of the play... then we’ll need to follow the course of the script,” mused Gack, stroking his chin and tilting his head.

“You mean, we’ll have to make it look like we can only move according to the script of Crazy ∞ nighT? But what we really need to be doing here is protecting Miku from death throughout the play, and attempting interference with reality... So it wouldn’t really help to keep performing act two onward as the scenario dictates, would it? If we consider this mansion to have a link to the theater... It would be better to have Miku moving around here and there. Like earlier.”

“...Rin’s right. When we were chasing Miku earlier, it was hard to

catch her with her running all over the place... and it's very likely she temporarily hid in a room then. Now, which room in this world would it link to...? Or if there isn't a direct link, maybe we should go general with interference...?"

"...Len, you're getting too complex for me. Make that bit less abstract so that I can understand, will you?"

"...Sure, putting it in a way you'd understand, Luka... I'm saying that even if years, decades, centuries pass in this world, it might not amount to more than a second in reality."

"What?! You mean..." Luka's mouth opened in wonder.

"But as an absurd amount of time stacks up in this world... it's won't necessarily amount to a useless moment. We can see what'll happen if we get rid of everything that poses a threat to Miku's life here... It might keep her from having to die in the real world. Just an example, but Burlet wrote there's a clock in this world too. We could keep destroying the clock hand that's a knife. It could overwrite the facts in reality and break the knife... maybe. But Burlet said we'd need the knife to return to reality, so scrap that plan. We can't destroy it."

"Wh... I see, yes... Hmm, so that's it, is it? Mhm, yes." Luka folded her arms and nodded with exaggerated motions.

"...Do you *really* get it? ...Anyway. Repeated interference with reality will cause feedback, and once it reaches a good point, we'll all use the keys to the ending to escape. That being the two clock

hands, the letter Miku has, the script, and the coffins... Once we have everything, we'll use them in order."

"Hmm... Well, then we'll have to think up an effective scenario - and, um, one that's kind of apology-ish toward Miss Miku - for what Mr. Len's suggesting..."

Meg took the script from Kaito's hands and flipped through. The Prologue was what Kaito had read earlier, with the information written by the mastermind. After that, starting with Chapter 1, was the story of Crazy ∞ nighT, the script Meg had penned with the other six's suggestions.

"Hmmm..."

"Difficult... If we're saying that we were sealed in the play's world, we must perform as the script dictates... As long as there isn't any kind of accident..." Gack again put his hand to his chin and had a grave look.

"...Accident, you say...?"

"Basically, we have to present a situation which convinces Miku that we're effectively fabrications of this world, created to be part of the set. We can't speak or act if it isn't according to the script of Crazy ∞ nighT. Our personalities, actions, everything has to be what's in this script. But that's super inconvenient! So if we could do something to ease up those rules just a tiiny bit..."

"...Miku will remember the events of act two onward... If we don't move according to it, she'll get suspicious. What can we do about

that...?”

Kaito summarized and explained Meg’s point for easier understanding, and sighed with worry.

“...Say, there’s something I’d like to try.”

“What, Luka?”

“Meg, can I see that script for a moment?”

“Huh...? Here you go.”

Meg went over to Luka and handed her the script.

“Err... um... the page between acts one and two... was here, right?”

“...”

Luka’s long, well-formed fingers flipped through the script. Upon reaching the page she was looking for, her hand stopped, grabbed the page, and forcefully pulled left and down.

With a pleasant ripping sound, the page was torn out.

“...!!”

No one could respond to the sudden action. The other six stared at her, faces frozen in deep shock.

“See, I tore it. Now even we... Ah, what do you know. We can’t remember a thing about act two onward, can we?”

“!!”

Everyone swallowed their words, too stunned by Luka's rash action.

"Ahem! Surely you can't have no reaction."

"...You really are a genius, I can tell."

Len's mouth twitched, and he gave Luka praise.

"Oh my! I feel rather nice, being called a genius by a genius."

"I-Indeed... By tearing out the intermission page of the script, then we, already subject to this world's laws, forgot it... And since we have to proceed according to script... We can't continue from act one, as we've forgotten the rest... But..."

"Sheesh! Luka, how could you not say a word to us before doing that...?"

Kaito and Meiko spoke wincingly.

"Because if I did, you might have tried to stop me. Wouldn't you? It's important to be forceful if you want to win big bets."

"True, that brilliant idea's saved us. Thank you. But next time, please talk with us first, won't you?"

"Yes, yes..."

"...Well, for now, thanks to Luka's, er... forceful epiphany, we have relative free reign to act in the play...", Kaito said with a hint of exasperation and a twitching face.

“What do we do with this page? Say someone stole it? Then I think we could move around as we like, but still with some restrictions.”

Fast-thinking Rin quickly considered and proposed their next action.

“Aha... If we say someone stole the page, we can act suspicious of one another and pretend to look for it. But should someone carry it on them at all times, or should it be hidden somewhere...?”

“Kaito’s the leader, why doesn’t he carry it?”

“...Well, yes, but...”

“?”

“In the event that something happens to me, it would be bad for Miku to get her hands on the page...”

“Yes... Then we’ll hide it somewhere where it will never be found.”

“How about in a coffin with one of the bodies?”

“Ahem, Rin? That’s just too disturbing. In a coffin, really...?”

“...Look! Me, and Luka... all eight of us have their real bodies lying down in those creepy coffins underground! We’re just putting it with our bodies! There’s nothing scary about it.”

“Eee... I-I... I can’t handle ghosts or specters or anything like that! No!”

Luka yelled, looking ready to cry at any moment.

“...Ghosts and specters are the same thing... Geez! Don’t be selfish! And it’s like Kaito says... There’s going to be long, long repetitions...”

Something could happen to any of us. We need to consider the worst case scenarios... We even have to consider the chance of us dying. But if that does happen, this world is fake. Our final line of defense, the reality we're trying to protect, is in the coffins. So if Miku opens the coffins and returns to the real world... Then that story where she's really the lead... her life, will end..."

Rin's eyebrows lowered sadly.

"We could get away with her seeing our bodies, in worst case. But Miku's coffin, certainly not. Let's make that our last line of defense. Her simply getting the idea that she's already dead, or supposing this is the afterlife, would put the stability of this world in peril. Whatever happens... we'll protect Miku's coffin with our lives. And we'll hide this intermission page in the coffin with her real body."

"Great! Well, shall we get going?", Meiko said, pumping her fist in the air.

"Huh...? Mei-pie, you're going? Now? To the coffins underground?"

"Of course! Time is of the essence. And there's no point prolonging conversation here. Once we've seen this world with our own eyes... then we can make plans!"

Following proactive Meiko's lead, everyone decided to do a search of the coffins underground.

"Um... Well then, I'll go in front and lead! I already have a disgustingly exact knowledge of the play's setting, so I probably

more or less don't even need to go... But yes, I am the one who wrote the basis for this world and drew up the mansion's layout. So let's go to that cellar, shall we! I wonder if that secret spiral staircase is there with the same trick and everything?"

Meg was the one to take the lead and guide the others. Kaito lifted up Miku and followed after. Everyone went into the hallway behind the stairs, turned right, proceeded ahead, and stopped in front of the wall-covering Twilight ∞ nighT painting that came into view on their left. Meg put her right hand to the left palm of the girl in the painting, the wall retracted into the forbidden room, and a spiral staircase leading underground appeared.

"I-It really...! It's a real secret spiral staircase... Oh my *gooooosh!*"

"...What kind of mechanism is this?"

"...You two are still such children..."

Rin and Len lept out first and ran excitedly down the staircase. Meg then began to examine the workings of the system, but Gack urged her that "going underground is our priority right now," and was reluctantly dragged down as well.

Everyone proceeded down the winding stairwell. Once they had gone rather far down, they finally reached a dead end with sturdy doors. For being made of wood, they were quite heavy, and Kaito and Gack remarked upon this as they slowly pushed them open. Through the doors was a room bathed in candlelight, containing eight coffins in neat rows. Without even having to open them, everyone seemed to know which one contained their body.

“I feel like it’s calling to me... Ah, Len, is that yours on the left?”

“...Is this the strange link between twins at work?”

Each of them walked without stopping to stand before their respective coffins, as if drawn to them.

“...What about Miku...?”

Kaito, holding Miku in his arms, proceeded toward... the other Miku’s coffin.

“...I guess when it comes time to open it, it is kind of scary.”

“What did I tell you, Rin! Always such denial with you.”

Kaito took off his jacket, threw it on the cold stone floor, and gently placed Miku down on it. Then he went to open the coffin. But...

“It won’t open... Is it locked?”

Looking around the coffin’s exterior, he noticed a long, thin hole. Len similarly tried to open his own coffin, found that it too wouldn’t open, and stared at the side.

“Guess it needs a key. Something about the size of a thick card.”

“A card? Where do you suppose that would be? If they won’t open, then how about we leave this be, hm?”

“Sigh, Luka... If you’re going to be like that, you’re going to be left

behind when it's time to leave this world," Len said bitterly as Luka remained visibly afraid.

"I-I don't want that!"

"Hmm... A key, huh...?"

Everyone wandered around the room in search of a key, and some closed their eyes and thought earnestly.

"Miku... still hasn't woken up, has she?"

Meiko put her ear to the sleeping Miku's chest and worriedly checked her pulse.

"Time still seems to be stopped for her..."

"Hmm. Maybe she'll wake up once we open up Burlet's invitation into the play and time here starts, like he said..."

"By invitation, could he mean the letter she has?", Luka questioned, now sitting next to Meiko and looking at Miku worriedly.

"Yes... Perhaps that's the invitation. We'll have to hide this torn page before opening that and waking Miku."

Luka slowly took the letter from Miku's hand.

"H-Hold on, Luka! Don't tell me... You won't open that yet, right? Right?"

Meiko's voice cracked in haste as she approached Luka.

“Of course not, I’m just looking. I was wondering if there was anything else...”

Luka began searching through Miku’s clothes. In the pockets of her skirt, she found a handkerchief and the minute hand of a clock. The handkerchief was the one she had given Miku before act one. Luka stared at it in silence, squeezed it tightly, then gently put it back in her pocket.

“...Huh? Hey, come to think of it, where’s the hour hand? Kaito, do you have it?”

“Hm? Yes, after pulling it out of her, I’ve been keeping it safe. Here.”

“Show me!”

Rin ran over to Kaito like she’d had a revelation, took the hour hand from his hand, and stared at it. Then she went over to Miku, and took the minute hand Luka found.

“...These are the ones from the real world. From the clock Kaito bought from that antique shop... after all that struggle to find the best one...”

“Indeed.”

“Miku broke the clock and took off the hands... Maybe it couldn’t quite be fixed after act one, so she put these in her pocket to go ask Kaito about it.”

“...”

“It’s just, well... kind of scary, I guess. That this happening to Miku was... really just all by chance... Like we’re just in the palm of an unseen god...”

“Accident, miracle, and coincidence are all the same thing in probability, Rin. And even if we’re all in the hands of... some mastermind... it’s a punishment we deserve.”

“...You’re right, Len.”

“To burden her with the crime if the world learned the truth... We never planned such a thing. But the letter she picked up told such lies. It was intended to hurt her, and make her lose trust in us... and at the same time, not knowing she was made to think that way, we couldn’t trust her either. I’m sure this must be punishment issued by Burlet.”

“...If it is, it’s certainly effective. I could hardly be more sorrowful, like my heart’s been torn to ribbons... A superb payoff,” Meiko muttered sadly, lowering her brows and holding her chest.

“Payback... Yet, he’s given us time to regret, and a chance to try again... Perhaps it may be a path to truly making this for the good of the troupe. This punishment... I feel it’s not solely for the purpose of him watching and enjoying our performance.”

Kaito put on a concerned smile. But his voice didn’t have a hint of pessimism.

The small doll girl squatting next to Miku’s coffin slid the hour hand

into the keyhole. Everyone watched with surprise. The key wouldn't turn. Next, she inserted the minute hand.

"Ah... It opened..."

The click of a lock opening echoed through the room. Rin hesitated to take the lid off the open coffin. So Meiko beside her forcefully lifted it off. Inside was Miku, sleeping like the dead. Everyone gulped and looked between her real body and the fake one sleeping on the floor.

Meiko took out the minute hand, put it in the coffin beside Miku's, and opened the lid. Her real body was inside, the spitting image of her. She gently put a hand to the sleeping Meiko's cheek.

"Sleep just a little longer..."

Len took the minute hand to open his coffin and Rin's next to it. Rin joined him wordlessly, and they opened their coffins in unison. Inside laid their normal-size human bodies. With a look of sorrow in her eyes like finally returning home, Rin quickly re-closed the lid. Len's face showed no reaction, and he handed the key to Gack. Gack opened the coffins with the key, checked his and Luka's bodies, then Meg and Kaito checked the safety of theirs.

"I think we shouldn't come back to this room until the last night, huh?"

Rin lifted up her lowered head and spoke.

“We can’t look too much and get homesick! I... I’ve decided, until that time comes, I’m not coming into this room again!”

Everyone reluctantly agreed, and went around locking the coffins with determination. Vowing to fight a ruthless battle in this world... The heavy sound of the locks reverberated against the high ceiling and faded away.

“...Ah, right.”

Kaito gently put the torn page near Miku’s hand, resting near her chest. Everyone watched her peaceful sleeping face intensely while the lid was slowly closed. Then it was locked. To change the mood, Kaito took a big breath and continued managing the situation.

“Now, let’s decide how we’ll operate here. There’s much to think about, but he did say we had plenty of time... So let’s get settled.”

“Yes, we must determine the course of our actions once Miku awakens,” Gack emphasized.

“Hmm. When Miss Miku wakes up, she’ll be made to think she’s in this strange world, the world of Crazy ∞ nighT, and everyone but her has been absorbed into the play. Then we’ll let Miss Miku know that this is a world that has to proceed to script, but a page in the middle was stolen! Then, uh... We say we have to find the stolen page and get the script back to normal... Yeah, just need a natural way to explain that. Hmm...”

Meg, diligently taking the task of summarizing in a way that everyone would understand, quickly explained how things would go down.

“...Given Miku’s personality, if she wakes up and sees our bodies right away, she’ll probably panic. “Why are you dolls...?” and all.”

“Right... And if we hit her with a big impact like that first, she can quickly grasp the situation, and no matter what happens after that, she’ll have a sort of tolerance. Like easing her in.”

“Exactly, Rin. It’ll be a big shock to her, but we’ll have her meet you first upon waking up, numbing her with fear... That should improve her adaptability to this world. It may make it easier for her to avoid her fate of death.”

“While we’re pretending to look for the page, we’ll have an excuse to search every nook and cranny of this world... magnificent. What’s more, we can keep guarding Miku. I’d also think it wise to create a time when she can be left alone, and the rest of us can meet...”

“Good point, Gack. We can’t know for sure if always accompanying and guarding her will be the best direction to head in. If events in this world and reality are linked, we have to expect that she will face danger many times. And we will protect her from that danger to the best of our ability. We’ll slowly build up events of her being saved.”

“Err, um, how is this going to progress, exactly? We should probably go around and see where things are, and grasp the layout in

detail...”

“...Even if we were to hide away and do nothing, leaving her alone, the chance of her dying would be high... wouldn't it? While she's just walking around, couldn't she trip and fall down the stairs again?”

“Right. We can't know how probable that will be until we begin... But the stairs must be especially dangerous. True, even if Miku dies here, it's a fabrication... just a single part of a long-repeating night. But we're trying to change reality by the accumulation of those parts. So fake or not, we can't let her die in the play either.”

“Then let's experiment to see how our actions may lower Miku's risk of death, and by how much.”

“Yes. First, like Meg suggested, we'll thoroughly search this mansion... this set. See where everything is, how we can use it, what poses a danger. Once we grasp that, we'll consider the link to reality and try to keep her away from things that would lead to her death.”

After Kaito took initiative to advance the discussion, the others chimed in.

“The elements involved in Miku's death tonight were extracted from reality. Those will be our way to cause interference with the real world. And I saw her on the foyer; that might be a clue, too.”

“So, then... we should keep her away from the stairs, for instance?”

That seems rather difficult, doesn't it? We can't expect her to stay in one place."

"I suppose we should always have someone watching to protect her anytime she comes near the stairs."

"Aha... Well then, I'll take that duty."

"Eh? L-Luka?! Giving Luka such an important role... is that gonna be okay?"

"Rin! You're so rude! ...Ah, perhaps you wanted to do it, is that it? But oh, too bad. You're just a little dolly now. Are you telling me if she were about to trip down the stairs, *you'd* stop her? You're shorter than she is."

"Ack..."

"True. Then let's leave the stairs to Luka. She has good reflexes and quick wits, so it's a natural fit for her. Always stand guard near the corridor on the second floor."

"Of course."

"Also, about the blank letter Burlet said she'd have at the start, where the ending can be written. It would be dangerous for her to use that to create an ending, so we should obtain it as early as possible."

"Hmm. In the play, she had the letter in her skirt pocket, so won't it be in her pocket when she wakes up too?"

"In that case, how about someone takes the duty of watching for a chance to steal the letter from her pocket? I'll..."

"...!! Yees! Yes yes yes YES!! That important role shall humbly be

fulfilled by I, the brilliant Doll Girl!”

“...”

“I-I suppose so... right, Len? Indeed, I too think it may go more easily with Rin. They’re both girls, after all.”

“...Fine. But don’t mess it up, alright...?”

“Hee hee hee. Leave it to me, dear brother!”

“...Sigh.”

“Also, the knife. This is the most dangerous of all... Someone should carry it, I think.”

“Yeah... But if we consider the link with reality, these hands should probably stay on the clock, shouldn’t they? Then when we return to reality, the knife will be out of Miku’s hands, back on the clock, maybe...”

“But what if she notices the clock and takes the hands once again...?”

“...”

“The clock is near the bottom of the stairs. With Luka on guard around the top of them, let’s also assign someone in front of the clock to strengthen defense of that area.”

“The effects this world of an instant has on reality will be extremely minor, won’t they? Even if we stop something here, can it really have a significant effect on the flow of time in reality...? I don’t want to see that knife in her chest ever again...”

Meiko’s face clouded remembering that tragic scene.

“As long as there’s the possibility, we have to try it. There’s definitely a risk leaving the hands out in the open like that. It’ll catch her interest, and she might try to take them. But someone will be watching nearby, and they’ll keep that from happening. No, all of us will. We’ll change the subject to keep her from getting too interested, and make up completely unrelated topics that will have her interest more than the clock does. The stacking of these effects could also have an effect on reality.”

“I see...”

“I’ll guard the clock. After all, I’m sure my doll form will be scarier to Miku than anyone else, so it’ll keep her away.”

“Good point. All right, Rin. Any other opinions?”

Meg swiftly raised her hand to speak.

“Um, I’d like to test the possibility of a very minor distortion. In the time before she runs from us and reaches the stairs... I wonder if we can buy time to slightly move back the moment of the tragedy?”

“...Aha!”

“It’s worth trying, right, Mr. Len?!”

“Yeah. And given the connection of the worlds, that might have a good effect.”

“Ahem? You brainiacs are going on about incomprehensible stuff again... I keep saying, keep it simple for me! Teamwork, everyone!”

“Wow... Never thought I’d see the day that word came from Luka’s mouth...”

Rin made a jab, but Luka paid it no mind and urged Len to speak.

“Right, well... When she was running away from us around the theater, we lost sight of her. Probably, Miku hid somewhere. It’s clear there’s a link between the theater’s second floor and this mansion’s second floor. So we need to find out where her hiding spot corresponds to here, and set something up there every night. Something that’ll postpone the time of her running around.”

“That’s right! And if we can slightly lengthen Miss Miku coming to a stop, when she reaches the stairs after that, the point at which that moment occurs might be slightly delayed from the time axis in reality...”

Meg glanced toward Len.

“...Kaito was immobilizing Miku, and Gack, Meg, Meiko, and Luka were behind him. When Miku was about to fall, all five of their hands reached for her. We might be able to make it so that one of them *was* able to grab her.”

“We’ll slightly delay just Miss Miku’s actions. That should be all we need to do. Then we’ll be able to make our response happen quicker.”

“...I see. So our goal is to, when we return, have it appear that we acted just in the nick of time?”

“That’s right, Miss Meiko!”

“...Sure, all right... I more or less get it, I believe. So we’re going to make her behave even more clumsily?”

“Well, I mean, you’re not *wrong*...”

Luka didn’t look entirely understanding, but came to her own independent interpretation. Meg was stunned, but affirmed it.

“So it’s necessary that we inspect the second-floor rooms even more diligently.”

“Come to think of it, that storeroom where Rin always hid to practice acting like a doll... That would be an ideal hiding spot. I was on the foyer near it when she suddenly ran out, so perhaps...”

“Huh?”

“Ahaaa! That’s just the right size to hide in. If Miss Miku was hiding there, then we should make a mess in the storeroom!”

“Hm? Why in the world would we?”

“If we mess it up, it’ll be easy to enter, but take some time to get out of. That’ll add that much more time. And that slight lengthening will slightly delay the time of her actions. If we do that, she should be a little bit delayed when we return to that instant in reality!”

“Then we’ll purposefully make a mess of the orderly storeroom. And when one night ends, the next will begin. Likely, the storeroom will be back in order when that happens. But if this world is linked with reality, then messing up the storeroom every time may eventually have an effect on reality. And effects *from* reality will also show in the play. So if we repeat this, we should start seeing

the storeroom a mess from the very beginning of a new night.

“Though as the playwright said, the extent of it may be “mind-numbing.” Maybe all we can do is slightly offset a broom that was leaning straight up against the wall. And how many nights it will take to accomplish even that... and how long until we see if such interference is even possible, we won’t know until we try...”

“It’s still just a hypothesis she hid in the storeroom then. But it’s possible...”, Gack nodded, quietly listening to Meg and Kaito’s explanation.

“Yes... We’ll exhaust every potential possibility. What if she hid in one of the other green rooms? Or the nap room? In that case, we’ll experiment with causing interference in all the possible corresponding rooms in the mansion.”

“Well, then... We should assign duties for who will handle which areas.”

“Um... There’s no diagram of the mansion, but we’ve become its residents, right? We’re already part of this world’s workings. Even though we’ve never been here or even seen it... Yeah, try it, guys! When I try to think about it, I know where things are! I’d guess Miss Miku wouldn’t know anything about the mansion, though, since she’s not a resident. That’s convenient! We can also tell how much time has passed in the play... Right now, yeah, we’re still in the waiting room, not started yet.”

“...! It’s true...”

Following Meg pointing this out, everyone went silent, and focused to try and remember the mansion's interior. Shortly after, Kaito issued orders.

"Guarding the stairs and the clock downstairs... Luka and Rin will take their respective stations, as decided earlier. One person each will take the areas around the forbidden rooms leading underground on both floors. And there should be a good balance between those on the first floor and those on the second. Let's make it easy for people with nearby stations to make contact if something happens."

"We'll also need a time to discuss all together each night. We'll have to leave Miss Miku alone for that, so we'll have her search for the stolen page in the room least likely to cause her to die."

Kaito nodded to Gack's suggestion.

"It pains me to trick her... But we'll get results. So that we can interfere with reality from fiction, and set the gears of time in reality just slightly off..."

Everyone seemed completely unified to survive this world.

"Hey, I..."

"What, Len?"

"...Burlet... He isn't mad about us making our own "lost Burlet play," I feel like."

"...Len..."

“You can take this as just a convenient interpretation, I don’t care... But if he were really mad about what we were doing and wanted to stop it, he would’ve stopped us way before it came to this. I don’t think that letter appeared immediately after act one. Maybe what made the letter appear was our elation over the success of act one? Because we were talking about how, if we got in financial trouble again, we could do the same thing... And... if the letter hadn’t contained that lie about intending to falsely accuse Miku of our crime, maybe she would have been swayed by the plight of our suffering troupe, and joined us in our crime.

“So maybe he left that letter to Miku so that, before we made the same mistake again... we’d have a chance to talk, Miku included, about whether it was really okay to keep going like this. But... Nah, of course he wouldn’t feel good at all about us forging a play he never even wrote...”

Len spoke meekly, and started to shake slightly. He seemed to want to express his feelings of regret for betraying Burlet, whom he respected unceasingly. Gack beside him squatted down to meet the small doll at eye level and silently patted his shoulder encouragingly. Kaito watched them and responded with a vexed look.

“...True. We were all ecstatic about act one’s success. We ignored the weight of our crime, and... discussed doing it again, if it succeeded. Getting a taste for it, we’d make another forgery... and I’m sure we would have done it...”

Nodding to Kaito, Meiko and Meg added their own opinions.

“This is a good place for us to reflect. There’s plenty of time here, above all.”

“Maybe we were about to lose something important that made us who we are. We might have gotten a little cocky...”

Luka smiled bitterly.

“...My, well, we’d have to ask Burlet to know what he really thinks. If I were him, I wouldn’t be able to impede people desperately trying to protect my company and works. Indeed, we only did it because we had to, to keep the company alive. We respect him; it’s not as if we wanted to profane him purposefully. So he must have understood that, and continued looking on. But we went too far. Hinting at the possibility of another forgery... This letter was meant to prevent that from happening.”

“He left us a sliver of hope...”

“Hope...?”

Kaito was slightly taken aback by Gack saying the word “hope,” then continued.

“Yes... Certainly, if we had trusted Miku and listened to her... and if she too had believed in us more than the letter, and shown it to us... surely the future would have been different.”

“We were a step too far apart as we sounded each other out... And

an unbelievable tragedy came of it. We should see it positively; that Burlet gave us plenty of time to reflect, and a chance to redo the past so Miku can live into the future.”

“That’s right! Well said, Meiko! We’ll reflect lots, and reach a future where Miku doesn’t have to die... It’ll be a happy ending!”

“...Rin, you say that with a smile, but it won’t be an easy road, you know? We haven’t the foggiest idea what things may happen in this world. Miku’s life will be in constant danger. And while we’re watching on tenterhooks, we’ll also have to act distant. If our feeling sorry for her makes us carelessly give in and tell her the truth, it all goes poof in an instant. And even if we reach that happy ending, once we’re back in reality, we’ll have to handle announcing the truth of our forgery, and many other trials... and will that really get us Burlet’s forgiveness?”

“Um, Rin, Luka. Burlet not being mad about our forgery is just my theory, okay...? Take it with a grain of salt. I just have to think of it that way, or...”

“It’d be too scary to handle, right? I understand, Len... We’re all scared. We’ve finally realized the weight of our crime and our fear. We have to toil away in this world, or it won’t be very good repentance. I’m prepared for it.”

Kaito put a hand to his heart and spoke like making a prayer.

“I wouldn’t call it atonement... But I can only hope she can have the slightest peace in this world...”

It was time to decide.

Everyone had solemn, serious faces as if performing a holy ritual. Each of them had their last thoughts on the reality they didn't yet know when they could return to.

"Ahh, I'm starving. I'll have to do without super-spicy foods for a while... Such a sad thing."

"...Miss Luka? You were talking all cocky and earnest before... *Why* are you bringing up a topic like that now? You're ruining the serious mood! Well, that's fine... We'll all go eat spicy food together when we get back to reality!"

"Haha... If it's just a little, I might give it a try."

"Kaito... If you go overboard and your lips swell into sausages again, I warned you. Heehee..."

"The food Miss Luka suggests is indeed delicious, but... it's all so magnificently spicy... I must prepare myself."

"Meals aren't a battle, Gack. ...I'll pass, thanks."

"Don't say that! You're taking the challenge alongside your sister, brother!"

"Ahem... You don't have to force yourself to come along. Truly, I'm the only one among us who can even eat such things! I... I'm inviting Miku, and we'll go just the two of us! I've never invited her out before... but I'm sure she'll love it. Of course, this is if we get back safely..."

Luka folded her arms and blushed. Everyone looked down at the sleeping Miku with kind smiles.

“Don’t worry. We’ll return someday. With Miku... all of us.”

Rin spoke with a superbly cheery smile. The letter in Miku’s hand faintly glowed.

“...Let’s open the letter. When she wakes up, it’ll be the first scene of act two...”

There was no hesitation left on their faces. Meiko slowly opened up the envelope.

Chapter 12: Decision

The piece of paper I took out of the coffin - the moment I touched it, memories came up at the back of my mind as clearly as if they were happening in front of me. Until partway through, they were my memories... and then once I fell down the stairs, they switched. Perhaps the memories of that person among the seven... the mastermind...

The next page we had been seeking was the scene of my death from reality. Down in the coffin before me was Miku, dressed as the Villager, sleeping peacefully... my own body.

“Hahah... You must be joking...”

They probably couldn't hear me muttering to myself outside the door. It had become completely silent outside. The dream I saw this morning, no, very, very long ago now. That was my memory. It was me who died. The actress who came before me never had anything to do with it. Len twisted it into a story about her being a “ninth person,” which had never been the case, so that I wouldn't realize I myself had died. And everyone followed his lead to act according to that ruse.

Certainly, there was a star actress in the company before I came along, who took many lead parts. And she did suddenly disappear one day. So I thought the one they sought to revive by acting out this crazed night wasn't me, a novice, bumbling actress, but their talented friend. But as those seven told an inconceivable number of

lies, fooled me and everyone, and had their minds suffer from it, they always believed in an outcome where I could live, and always reached out toward me.

A single person can't make a play. Each person is there for the play, and the play is there for them. A phrase commonly spoken among the troupe. Their hearts were one for me, and for me, they endured an outrageously long time, the same night again and again, going mad, suffering. And yet, I...

"I" was a fake.

And this world, created to save me when I should have died, was a fake world. A world made because everyone wished for it. A world where that night was sealed away. I had to put them into a corner. If I'd not hesitated and just showed them the contents of the letter... If I hadn't given up, and trusted them just a little bit more... If we had met halfway, maybe the future could have had a happy ending.

To start time again in reality, I would kill myself, the false me, so she couldn't be revived anymore. That would end this world by the absence of the lead. That would end the sleep of the real bodies, and all eight of them could return to the moment before my death. If I stayed here forever... I would be able to just keep living in this world. Dying again and again here wouldn't truly kill me. So I had to come to that True enD.

Unable to trust everyone, taken by suspicion, and driven mad...

there had been nights when I killed them all by my own hand. It must have been frightening. Painful. To be killed in a play they were putting on for my sake, by the person they were trying to save... how... how sad it must have been.

With the confirmation that I was fated to die in reality, I now knew “I” was a fake. But I was still scared... scared to die. My hand holding the knife trembled. Just when I thought I’d finally made it... Everything I’d thought up to now was a nurturing world of kind lies. I was alone, all alone...

I couldn’t keep in the tears anymore. All this time, I’d been kindly, warmly protected by them all...

I had no way of knowing just how much time this world had repeated for. Because I couldn’t remember any of it. I stood up and unlocked a nearby coffin.

Miss Meiko... Sleeping with that brilliant smile, how long had she put up without her beloved beer, and all this hardship? I slowly went unlocking the remaining coffins one by one.

Mr. Gack... His face was stern and serious even in sleep. Like he was in the midst of his duties...

Mr. Kaito... He’d now completely assumed the look of the Master. He must not have been able to smile for so long since coming to this world.

Miss Meg... was lying face-down in her coffin... She's even more absurd than I thought... Without thinking, I laughed, now of all times.

Miss Luka... was crying. I wanted to wipe away her tears, but I'd gotten blood on the handkerchief she gave me... I always did want to eat spicy food with her.

Rin... Len... I swept away the tears blocking my vision.

Just wait... I'll return you to your bodies... your world.

My ears slowly regained the lost sound. I thought it had suddenly gone quiet, but evidently I was just very deep in thought. I heard them shouting outside and ramming something against the door. They seemed intent to bust it down.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to my body, resting peacefully in the coffin.

With the hour hand of the clock, I gently cut open my left arm. With a bit of pain, there came fresh blood. Yes, injuring Kaito earlier had made me realize this method... I would use the blood as ink and the minute hand like a pen to write on the blank ending page. The pen fit easily in my hand, and moved smoothly.

So that this play wouldn't repeat again, I wrote a dramatic ending, that would leave a tinge of transience - and take everyone outside

this mansion. Unlike my trial with the wine, the thick blood lettering glowed shortly after it was written. I began to see the ceiling and walls twist inward from time to time. Order was leaving the story drawing near its end. It must have been because I'd accepted my death in reality.

I put the finished page at the end of the script, a perfect fit between the back cover and the last written page. The script gave off a pale light.

Thank you for everything, everyone... I'm glad I was able to be your friend in this magnificent night...

My body moved on its own, gripping the hour hand in both hands. I thrust it toward my left chest. Pain shot through me. It hurts... I can't stand the pain...

"Miku! What have you...?!"

With a loud crashing sound, footsteps approached.

"...The script... Er, what does this say...? Oh no! There's going to be a fire starting in the kitchen! We have to take her out of here...!"

Yes, this is best. Now everyone has to do this. They have to go outside. In Bad ∞ End ∞ Night, I had thought it best to forcibly put an end to the play, and killed them all. But still the play didn't end.

This time, I would destroy the play itself. Just like the former playwright's mansion vanished into illusion... I'd burn down the whole mansion.

"Miku!! Stay with us!!"

"Dummy! Miku, you big dummyyyyyy!!"

I thought I heard Luka and Rin screaming next to me. I'd wanted to at least see this last performance, but my vision started to get misty. Ah, the pain... Had it hurt this much when I died in reality? Or would it be just an instant, with no time for such pain? After I'd finally remembered, I'd just lost it again.

I saw a figure in my mostly-blind vision. Who's that talking there...? It's like I'm looking through a screen of fog. I reached out to try and push the fog away. I squeezed out the last of my energy. But the fog wouldn't clear. My hand fell, lifeless, and was grabbed tight.

"We won't let you die again!! We won't..."

I have to die, or you can't return to reality... I thought that, but I couldn't speak it now.

"Everyone, hurry to the entrance! Hurry!!"

My body was lifted up and swayed slightly. Was I being carried? ...It's hot. There was the sound of fierce flames.

"Is everyone here?!"

“We have to chance it! It’s time for the main event...”

“...We’ve had more than enough practice.”

I heard the creaking sound of an old door.

One for all, all for one... Thank you, everyone. If, in the reality we finally return to... if just a moment after that, the final curtain falls on my performance... Even so, I’m glad I was chosen as the lead...

My senses blurred and sank. Ahh... maybe it’s been all those sleepless nights. It’s been so long. So very... sleepy...

Last Chapter

I swiftly threw the roses on top of the dresser. I heard the man outside the thick door, the one referred to as the “gentleman with the roses,” walking away with a triumphant gait, and I sighed in annoyance. It was like this each and every day... He had a lot of sway in this industry, an authority so to speak, so I was unable to blatantly refuse his depressing goodwill said to be his “support of me.”

Still feeling a bit gloomy, I slumped down on a luxurious leather sofa and saw the crudely-thrown bouquet in the corner of my eye. The bad manners of discarding a bouquet given to me by another would surely get nosy Meiko yelling at me if she saw it, but luckily, no one was in the green room.

The man brought me all varieties of roses, and today, he brought me the same ones as he did that day... a bouquet of marvelous blue roses. He must have decided that he’d only give blue roses for the most important occasions. I didn’t want to admit it, but he did have a kind of foresight. The eyes, at least, to see the opportunities of “if not now, then when else?”

Tomorrow would be the final act of *The Silence of the Snowy Night* - a modern re-imagining of the former Burlet classic. The roses signified his anticipation for a strong performance. If this succeeded, the Burlet Company would be heading for another big turning point.

The success of Crazy ∞ nighT's first showing two years ago made the company a leader in a revival of theater in West End, and our finances recovered bit by bit; our business was now twice the size it was two years ago. With our effective sponsors, we also gained new members.

And, while preserving the historical legacy of theater as it was gradually lost, we also made an effort to add revamped versions of the scripts that better matched modern lifestyles and appealed to the young people of today. This idea soon spread from just our company to all of West End, beginning a cultural revolution dubbed neoclassicism.

Rather than just reminiscing on the past, inheriting the great relics thereof and carrying them to the next generation... A very lofty, ambitious goal, but I saw the members of all theatrical companies no longer looking resigned about their crumbling troupes, but lively and full of hope for this cultural revival. And this, too, all began with the incident that night.

Today marked exactly two years since the first performance of Crazy ∞ nighT. In the hectic days that passed since then, everyone greatly improved their acting and matured. Myself included...

"I'm coming in, Len! I brought your bags! ...Ooh, that costume looks nice! You'll hit the mark with that one, yep! Er... aughahEM!"

Knock, knock, knock.

“...”

After taking a step inside and saying what she wanted to tell me, my sister suddenly remembered, cleared her throat exaggeratedly, and apologetically knocked on the door. I didn't even know where to start.

“...At least you never forget the *knock* part, Rin.”

“Ahh, sorry, sorry! We're together at work and at home... Sometimes I forget which is which! Ahaha...”

Rin didn't look sorry at all, coming inside with her usual cheery smile. She gently put the bags she was carrying on the glass table in front of the sofa, did a big stretch, and sat on the sofa across from me, the table between us.

My sister and I left our parents' home to live together a solid seven years ago now. At home, we didn't mind each other; not bothering to knock every time we came and went, and never found any fault in that. But at work, our relationship was as colleagues. I wish she'd learn a thing or two about restraint. Particularly since she was a girl, even if we were brother and sister, I wish she'd learn a few feminine sensibilities... Yeah... I mean, I wouldn't want them to be too similar, but I wish she'd...

“Be more like Luka, hm...?”

“...”

“Ahaha! I can see eeeverything you're thinking, Len! Like, *how* many years do you think I've been your sister?”

“Sigh... I know. I just wish you’d learn from her example a little.”

“Well, but I did ask Luka! And she said, “My, it’s too soon for a young girl of sixteen to be thinking about sex appeal! It’ll soon come to you naturally, so just stay as darling as you are now, Rin!””

Rin imitated Luka’s typical pose - right hand on hip, leaning head back, looking down on me - as well as her way of speaking, if a bit exaggerated.

“As darling as you are now, huh...”

Indeed, her staying just the way she was was the wish of her bodyguards, and something desirable for the troupe as well. It was hard to find talented child actors.

“...But hasn’t she been working as a model since she was fifteen?”

“Oof...”

“It’s important to have skilled child actors... It’d actually be a big relief for the troupe if you *stayed the way you are now forever.*”

“What’s THAT supposed to mean?! I’m already a big girl! I’m too old to do child roles! My doll role in Crazy ∞ nighT is the closest I’m getting!”

“Well, you’ve barely changed at all in two years. I think you can keep it going.”

“Urrrrrgh. Len, you dog...”

“Who’d have thought there’d be such a gap between twins... Makes

me feel sorry for you. Your brother's gotten a shoulder *or more* over you... huh, cute little sister?"

"Screeeee! What's with that nonchalant "but I was always ahead in terms of brains" implication?! I'm a late bloomer! This is just the start!"

I grinned and teased my sister as she glared at me bitterly, and she soon turned away with a pout. I thought her acting had improved a lot in these two years, but her young appearance and thoughts were as childish as ever. I'd have to cheer her up soon, or I wouldn't be able to stand it. I noticed she was staring at a certain point, still in the same face-averting pose.

"Hey... Are you really going?"

"..."

Her serious soprano echoed, her gaze not leaving the blue roses on the dresser. The gentleman had probably left me them as a farewell gift. With the end of tomorrow's show, I would be quitting as an actor. And my reason wasn't that I had no desire to do plays anymore, or that I came to hate this company, or that I wanted to switch to a different profession.

"I'm leaving in two days. I've already scheduled the train ride."

"...I see..."

The event that changed everything for us... The performance of Crazy ∞ nighT, Burlet's lost libretto, completed successfully. It garnered such a reaction that even once the last day of the show

was over, there were already fans clamoring for more performances. And it didn't stop with West End; talk of it spread around the world, causing a major movement.

The actors' stunningly believable performances, the set prepared in amazing detail, and the script that could have varying interpretations for different viewers. Reviews raved that all of this together made it seem like you were witnessing another world on the stage, and there was unending applause from all fields.

And yet, during this peak of the Burlet Company, we announced the truth about the forged script, apologized, and repaid the tickets sold in full. This shocking revelation made the media do a 180, and they panned us. Voices scorning our sacrilege of Burlet echoed around the streets outside the theater, and our sponsors, feeling deceived by our true intents, were bewildered and stepped out.

The name of the Burlet Company, just yesterday so renowned, instantly plummeted. On top of our standing debts was added the cost of repaying the tickets, and indemnities to our sponsors. We were in a sudden predicament of needing to gather a massive sum of money overnight.

But then, at the same time... the dominant opinion came to be that it wouldn't be right to let such magnificent amusement end here. Some refused repayment for their tickets, some began donating to the theater, some created and administered support groups. The drive to support the troupe became more passionate by the day, and before we knew it, it was not just about our troupe, but the

whole of theater in West End.

All theaters were protected, and again this was regarded a culture of amusement that should survive for future generations, leading to the neoclassical movement. Pushed by the tide of the times, the company got back on its feet financially. Now it had recovered to the point where it would be busy for days in a row, making us all work very hard.

Come clean to the world, earnestly apologize and reflect, and keep showing them your effort, and you'll get a second chance. The future Miku had guided us to... it was now just as she said.

Our sacrilege was a mistake that would never be forgotten. But keeping that mistake in our hearts to reflect upon as we strived to be recognized again proved to be an important asset to us. To err is human; none of us are perfect. That's why we're able to accept and overcome our mistakes. The one who set us straight and persuaded us of that was none other than Miku in her lead role.

"Ahh, all the audience members are gonna be crying... Right as you say you're going on a trip..."

"..."

"Besides, after you've grown so tall, and gotten just a little bit cooler... Oh, those poor girls who wanted to see Len keep maturing! Well, go ahead! Make those girls cry... uh... No, wait. Completely forgot that there's another group who's gonna be crying more... Those people who always give you bouquets, and fancy

wristwatches, and villas... And I'm sure that rose gentleman will be sad, too. Alright, go! Make those men -"

"Stop talking, or I'm gonna be seriously pissed..."

With a quick glare, Rin trembled and shut her mouth. She still seemed to be concerned about a time in the past when she'd similarly teased me when I was displeased, and I pretended to be genuinely mad to get back at her. It was kind of adorable how she was fooled into thinking it was real anger, but I didn't really like teasing her in this way. Though, even knowing she was just joking, my spine shivered a little.

"I-I was kidding! Kidding! But, look, suddenly leaving behind the friends you've worked alongside for years now... They're going to be really surprised, and lonely! You've experienced that plenty yourself, right, Len?"

"...Guess so."

"I was just thinking, "Len makes *the third*"... Honestly, it makes me wonder who might leave us next..."

I'm the third... More than any other actors in the troupe, the main cast were friends that had worked together for years and deeply trusted one another. One of those friends suddenly leaving was a very painful thing for those left behind. Rin, especially, was more afraid than most about being left behind, about "farewells." The first of those we experienced... It was about three years ago, when the company was at risk of bankruptcy.

Our star actress served as the leader of the rebels who sought change in the company. Speaking her name was still taboo in the troupe... especially in front of us, the main cast. Prior to our extreme financial troubles, she was adored as a leading figure right after Kaito, and even I looked up to her as an actress and as a person. But...

“The Burlet Company’s plays are backwards nostalgia.” The day it was announced that our audience numbers had hit a record low, that was what she said. And that was when we broke off, in a sense. She proposed a revolution: that we, to keep the troupe alive, discard the Burlet plays we’d protected since their creation, and shift to brand new ones.

But we joined this company to perform Burlet’s plays and protect his legacy. If you just wanted to act, you had the option to go to another troupe at any time, or go into movies. She neglected that most of those who joined us joined with that strong resolve - if it weren’t the Burlet Company, there would be no point. So it was hard to accept her view.

Starting with our leader Kaito, and those who would later appear in Crazy ∞ nighT - Meiko, Luka, Gack, Meg, Rin, and myself - the main cast unanimously opposed her and fought the revolutionaries as conservatives. Neither party would meet halfway, and many days there were arguments that got nowhere, little more than shouting contests.

The situation favored the rebels. Everyone was gradually swayed by

their leader's view, and on top of that, some scorned Burlet who they'd before looked up to as if blaming him for the troupe's troubles. Until finally, there was an incident. One morning, when I came to work as usual, statues, portraits, and other artifacts of Burlet's had been smashed by the entrance to the theater. The moment I saw it, I made up my mind: I had to protect Burlet's works and history, this troupe and everyone in it.

I quickly went to catch Meg, who had only been in the troupe for just over two years then, and asked her to show me the script she was most proud of that she hadn't yet publicized. What she showed me was a fantasy-style mystery about seven odd characters living in an extravagant mansion in an eerie forest, who are one night visited by a village girl; then strange incidents happen around the mansion one by one, and everyone works to uncover the culprit. The story was a bit clunky, but something about it grabbed me, so I soon showed it to Kaito.

Kaito was quite a fan of her "Twilight Night." His approval strengthened my resolve to *execute the plan*. This script would be falsified as Burlet's lost libretto, Crazy ∞ nighT, and we would announce its sudden chance discovery, gathering the world's attention for a shot at reviving the troupe. All that was known about Crazy ∞ nighT was the title; no information remained about what kind of story it actually was. I actually considered that to be convenient.

When I told Kaito my plan, at first he gave me a look like I'd punched him in the gut, thinking about something. I still remember

him telling me “I’m sorry for putting such a burden on someone so young,” and “I’ll tell everyone it was me who came up with the forgery plan, so don’t say anything,” apologizing to me on the verge of tears. It annoyed me then how he seemed to be treating me like a child. But now that it had been three years, I think his sincere kindness was very helpful.

After Kaito got started with the plan, all of the conservative members gathered and had discussions. Not knowing if the Burlet Company would have a tomorrow, we readied ourselves with varying worries, and conducted the plan in secret so the rebels wouldn’t know.

Following the interview about the discovery of Crazy ∞ nighT, the former rebels were accepted as friends again, and the conflict dissipated. But their leader alone wouldn’t be convinced to the bitter end. Kaito extended his hand to her, offering her another chance to be friends; he passionately tried to persuade her. But while she was half-inclined to agree with his persuasions... I told her this.

“It’s too late to turn over a new leaf. This company doesn’t need you anymore.”

Back then, I simply couldn’t forgive her for thoughtlessly breaking those relics of Burlet. She never responded to what I said; with a face of despair, she vanished.

“...Don’t you think? So really... Hey! Len, are you listening?”

Rin puffed her cheeks with displeasure and glared at me with arms folded.

“...”

“Geez. Getting all sentimental and thinking to yourself again? Are you still concerned about that girl? Because I doubt *she* still cares about you going all “Nobody needs you, go quit, you big old dummy!” Plus I heard she doesn’t mind at all the other day.”

“Well, sure. ‘Cause I’ve never said such childish slander. Besides, even if she doesn’t care anymore, it doesn’t mean I can’t... ...Wait, WHAT?! Where - how do you know...?!”

“Oh? Right after she left three years ago - heck, I’d call him her replacement - that gentleman with the roses suddenly started coming, remember? So then...”

“Huh...? Why are you mentioning *him* now...?”

“Hey! Let people finish their sentences! Right, the day after she quit, that gentleman started coming to the theater diligently... And for some reason, he brought Len roses every time. Then with my good intuition... no, as the great detective Rin, I started to talk a good, long look at him... and then I realized! Could those two be... father and daughter?”

“...! N-No way...”

“Right! I had a hunch, so I asked him all secretly. And what do you know, it was just as the great Rin predicted! Then we talked about a

bunch of stuff, like, “Is your daughter doing well?”, then “I’m sorry Len said such terrible things to her,” then “No, no, my daughter’s at fault for troubling all of you,” then “she’s helping me with work at home right now”...”

“...Why the hell did you never tell me about this?”

“Huh? Well, I mean, Len, you completely denied and drove her out when she was all contemplated and ready to make amends! I thought it would be funnier for you to keep thinking, “I hurt someone who had a promising future and made her quit... What a sin I’ve done! I must atone!””

I couldn’t believe I was the only one who knew absolutely nothing about this, completely fooled by them. I thought there had to be *something* about that gentleman’s courteous visiting, but trying to comprehend this unexpected explanation made my brain tired.

“...Are you still in contact with her, then?”

“If you’re wondering about that, you should ask the gentleman directly! This time you can ask if his daughter’s doing well. Though I guess if you’re still mad about what she did, talking at ease is out of the question. But if you wanna meet her anyway, you can tell her the company took the conservative track and overcame their financial woes.”

“...I can sort of understand what she was trying to do back then now. But if we had lost, and the Burlet went away from the Burlet Company... Or the other way around, if we had stubbornly adhered to doing perfect Burlet plays... either way, I think the company

would have been doomed. The reason it's still going now... is because after she left, Miku joined. It's all thanks to Miku."

"...Yeah."

"Miku showed us a possibility in the middle, that wasn't revolutionary or conservative. She taught us the importance of meeting halfway. How to compromise between accepting change for the future, and protecting the past... She put some precious things on the line to tackle that essential issue."

"That's right. We all tried to stop her, but Miku was quick to sell that bracelet of Burlet's... it was a memento from her grandma, wasn't it?"

"Yeah..."

"You can't let go of a memento from your only relative that easily. But Miku took the initiative and pulled us along with her determination... Even though she was just a novice, only here for six months, she believed in and bet so much on us. So we made sure to apologize for our sin, and really noticed what was important, what we should be doing."

"Everyone was pretty desperate... Kaito let go of all his antiques, and went begging for the support of the father he dislikes so much..."

"And you sold almost all of the Burlet stuff you'd collected. You were pretty out of it, temporarily... Everyone just did whatever they could to raise funds for that huge sum. But... in the end, most people didn't come for their refund, so it was kind of a waste."

Thinking about all our faces then... I feel so bad, I can't even laugh..."

Rin faced me with sympathetic eyes as she remembered it, smiling bitterly.

"...Stop it. Don't put salt in that wound."

"I mean, everyone looked like it was the end of the world! Especially you and Kaito. Eyes so glazed over, you'd think you were up all night."

"Come to think of it, you and Meg got off pretty easy."

"Ahem! Little Rin here doesn't have anything worth selling to begin with. Meg sold a bunch of rare old books, I think, but she said she could go to the library anytime for books. Said the revised versions were easier reads than the originals anyway, and she felt nice having less books cluttering up the house. And I have to agree."

My sister nodding to herself seemed to be remembering Meg's very unkempt room. I would never want to live in a place like that.

"...Sigh. You two don't have a shred of emotion or romance... You're too practical."

"And that's a bad thing?! It's called having vitality! Anyway, Len, before you set out, you should go to that rose gentleman and his daughter, and..."

"I know. I'm surprised they were related, but... I'll go talk with them before I leave tomorrow."

“Excellent! Make sure your feelings are made clear. Apparently Mr. Gentleman always liked Burlet plays, and that’s why his daughter strove to be an actress. So maybe if you forgive her, she might come back?”

“...I’ll tell her to look after the new Burlet Company.”

Rin smiled and crossed her fingers.

“But gosh... This sure is sudden, without any warning at all. Have you told everyone else yet?”

“...Not yet. But...”

“Well, that’s fine! They’ll probably be surprised for ten seconds tops, then look like nothing happened and give you a good smile! Then be like, nothing to worry about with Len!”

“...Let’s hope.”

“They understand. Because you’re setting out for yourself, and for the troupe, right? You’ve always said it. You want to see, hear, and experience the world more. So you can improve your insight and acting ability... You told them that waaaaay long ago. You shouldn’t need to say a thing... They’re your friends, they know!”

“...Rin...”

My sister looked down with a bit of sadness, then looked back up with a gentle smile.

“Hey... Actually, a letter came...”

“A letter?”

“Yeah. From dad...”

“...!”

A letter from him... What in the world could it be? And Rin had probably read it already... I looked up at her with worry, but I saw no fear or despair on her face.

“...Don’t worry, Len. I can’t stay a kid forever. I’ve changed since that time I just cried and cried that dad didn’t care about me. A chick has to leave the nest and live alone eventually, right...?”

“Yeah... So then... What did the letter say?”

“...He wants to meet.”

“Wha...! Really?! Not a representative or anything? When...”

“I won’t be meeting him.”

“...Why not?” My ears doubted the words, so I promptly replied.

“Because I already wrote a reply saying we wouldn’t meet him, and sent it.”

“You... How could you be -”

“Did you want to see him, Len...?”

“...”

My father... It would be a lie to say I didn’t want to meet one of the world’s best actors. Not as my father, but as an actor I respected, I would jump at a chance to meet him... But I never thought the day would come when *he* said he wanted to meet. He never had any interest in us, always focused on acting; a man who only loved himself. But when I saw him acting through a screen, his

overpowering charisma was, as someone in the same field, impossible for me to deny. All actors aspired to his perfect and flowing performances, and longed to be like him.

“I think I’ll meet him once I’ve matured as a full-blown actress. With my groom!”

Rin smiled peerlessly with a pose even more confident than Luka.

“...You’re planning marriage already?”

“Huh? Well, of course! I’ll introduce him suddenly and surprise him, and be like, I’m getting married!”

“Getting a little ahead of yourself... You don’t even have a boyfriend yet...”

“Wh... Well, look who’s talking, Len! Until I do, I need to come up with a perfect plan to deepen bonds with my future groom!”

“...A perfect plan, all in your mind... I worry for mister groom’s future.”

“Hey... What’s that mean?!”

“You already seem enthused about keeping him under your thumb. And you already seem to be planning on him marrying into your family...”

“Yeah, obviously! Discarding the name of Milord is just unthinkable!”

“Sigh... I sympathize for a certain someone’s life to come. So is that all you wanted to say? It’s almost showtime for me.”

I turned my gaze to a wooden box on the glass table between us.

“Oh, I almost forgot! You know the guy who always buys special seats for every show, right? With the silk hat, the face-covering bangs, imitating the portraits of Burlet...”

“The Silk-Hat Baron?”

“Right! He gave us this as congratulations for Crazy ∞ nighT’s second anniversary!”

Inside the box was a bottle of red wine. I looked at the label.

“...This is a real antique... Pretty expensive, I bet.”

“Yeah, seems like you could build a whole house with that much... Amazing. But it’d be rude to refuse, and he seemed really grateful. And once tonight’s show is over, since all the actors from then are together today, we’re going to have a party! We can drink this then! Wonder how it tastes...”

Rin’s eyes sparkled, and she crossed her arms in front of her chest.

“Hmm...”

“Huh...? You don’t look happy at all!”

“Well, I don’t especially like wine or anything. All these rules about how to pour it and giving your thoughts after drinking... It’s too annoying. It’s not for me.”

“Geez! You just have to be modest and put on the right mood, that’s all! You may look like a delicate prince, but inside, you’re

sooo crude, Len. But... well, while he'd usually go with beer at our afterparties... if he were here, I bet he'd enjoy this for sure."

"He"... Yes, he loved wine enough that he'd make it from his own grapes. His eyes would be sparkling at this.

"Well, can you tell everyone the party's all set?"

"Sure. But will everyone really be coming? It's so sudden..."

"It's okay! I already checked earlier! *All seven* are on standby!"

"Really...? There's one member I'm not so sure about, if it's the cast of Crazy ∞ nighT assembling... I wonder if they'll be extremely late, *just like then...*"

"Such a worrywart! Meg arrived ages ago. Look, she... I think she's really become self-reliant now. After that day, she's been very sure not to arrive late, even if she's on her own."

"...Er... yeah. She hasn't been late once since then..."

Formerly liable to being very late, as of a certain day, Meg had learned to keep to a schedule. To quote her, "Because there's no longer someone to come pick me up if I'm going to be late..."

"Where do you suppose he is now?"

"Who knows..."

Memories of the one who was no longer with us crossed my mind. The *second* major farewell we experienced. Right after the performance of Crazy ∞ nighT, he vanished without warning. All he

left was a letter reading “I was satisfied. Thank you for everything.” We searched his house and his farm, but no one knew where he was.

Everyone was bewildered by the sudden loss, and was sorrowful about it, but taking the words “I was satisfied” to heart, the remaining seven were determined to move forward. Who knows if it was his absence or what, but... especially after the first night of Crazy ∞ nighT’s performance, the actors’ bonds seemed much closer.

A knocking on the door brought me back from my thoughts. I opened up.

“Um... Len. It’s almost showtime.”

“Miku. Aren’t you a little too nervous?”

“Well... but...”

Miku came in. She wore a thick coat with a hood over her head; her attire for the snowy scene to come seemed a little hot for the current season. Miku had been in the troupe for two and a half years now, but still got nervous before a show. She was shaking like she was about to collapse, and her face stiffened.

“Good luck, you two! I already finished my part yesterday, so I’ll be watching the epilogue from the audience! Len’s... last act!”

“...Not my last. I’ll come back... Count on it.”

Winking at us and slapping Miku on the back, Rin left the green room. Miku's face stayed all bunched up; did she hit her that hard?

"That take away your nerves? Her methods are the best... I figured she could do it in one shot."

"Yes...! My senses focus on the pain, and the haze in my mind gets blown away!"

I was relieved by the first smile I'd seen from her today. She wasn't in a major role this time, but she'd perform with me, the lead, in a concluding scene in the last act in which the dead were mourned. It was the most demanding scene in the play; one she and I had both always wanted to act, it being our favorite among Burlet's stories. And in this version, changes had been made for newer audiences, like slightly raising the age of the characters. I was as nervous as I was sentimental. But Rin coming along and talking with me eased up most of my nerves.

"Um... Rin said this was your last...?"

"..."

I tried to cover it up, but naturally she noticed. There was a time when she would always be too focused on herself to pay attention to people's conversations and the motives for their actions. She'd really matured in less than three years.

"It's nothing. Just think about the show for now."

"...Right. Okay!"

Briefly uneasy, she trusted me and smiled wide. She could read into other people's feelings and the situation, and as proof of her trust in others, she never asked any more questions than she needed to... She'd gotten much better at reading lines, too. She was fine now. She could get on perfectly well without me around.

Putting on a white coat, I went and checked myself in the mirror one last time. No problems. I looked up at the roses on the dresser, and they glowed in the moonlight coming in the window. Blue roses signify miracles... Whenever I looked at them, somehow, I was always reminded of that single moment on that night.

We and Miku had an argument, and there was discord between us, so Miku ran away, and we gave chase... She turned a knife at us, Kaito was hurt trying to stop her, and as Miku was about to fall down the stairs...

It happened in an instant. Kaito and the other four upstairs quickly noticed and managed to grab Miku's hand in time, so nothing serious happened, but then... All eight of us suddenly started crying without knowing why. Everyone was bewildered as to why, but we just kept crying. We and Miku quickly apologized to each other and talked things out. We apologized for stubbornly denying her opinion, and Miku for believing in a mysterious letter more than she believed in us.

It seemed like in just a moment, strong bonds formed between us. After it happened, I pondered if there was something special about

that moment, some magic, but I still don't know what that strange incident was all about.

All of a sudden, I noticed a small piece of paper in the bottom of the box with the wine. Rin didn't seem to notice it, but it looked like a message from the sender. I knew who she was talking about: the man who watched from the special seats nearly every day. Wearing a silk hat and with long bangs that covered his face, he seemed to be imitating Burlet, and certainly resembled the portraits of him in my collection.

He was the first of our passionate visitors, and now we had many more. But even so, fans that have given us their support for so long make me feel more grateful and happy than anything. I picked up the small card with elegant writing and looked it over.

"That's from... the Silk-Hat Baron who Rin was talking about...?"

I guess Miku wanted to read it too; she stood on her tiptoes and peered at it.

"Nope. You can't see it."

"W-What...?! Put your hand lower!"

"All right, all right."

I'd grown a fair bit, and now looked down on her. I held the card low enough for her to see it.

"“I found some magnificent wine, so please serve it to everyone.

Isn't it grand to go wild with wine on those crazy nights? ...Applause and a word of thanks for that magnificent night. From the Phantom Butler"..."

Taken aback, I carefully read back every word. It couldn't be. But thinking back on it, he would frequently skip practice, be gone when I looked away and then suddenly be back. Was he, the one no longer with us, this Silk-Hat Baron...?

If that were so, then on the days he wasn't performing, did he disguise himself to come see our plays as a guest...? But for what possible purpose?

"Len... This is a message from the Silk-Hat Baron, right...? But, Phantom Butler... and the way he says "magnificent," do you think..."

"..."

"Hey, this signature is even the one Burlet used... Isn't it fancy?"

At the bottom of the card was a wax seal. It was exactly like the one I was familiar with. Since I was young, I collected items from the legendary playwright Burlet. Among that collection was a seal he used in place of a signature. This had such impressive quality that even I had to call it "magnificent." The way he could imitate his appearance to the finest detail, too, was magnificent. I could only wonder how he managed to recreate this seal which, a hundred years later, not even collectors had.

"It can't be the real one, can it...? ...No, there's no way... It's been a

hundred years.”

An absurdly unrealistic theory came to mind, but I immediately dismissed it. Ridiculous. If he were alive, he’d be over a hundred and fifty. Unthinkable. As long as that description commonly used to praise him, “creating overwhelmingly realistic other worlds on the stage,” had no special power.

“I wonder if he’s doing okay...”

“He should be fine. He’s probably making wine in his vineyard.”

Our vanished friend was likely watching us from outside the company as a common lover of Burlet’s works. And tonight, enjoying the high-quality wine he’d provided for us, we’d talk all about that performance.

Since that day... since that moment, something changed. Everyone had, like me, learned from their past actions and tried to change. Yes, thanks to Miku, our Cinderella, who matured to become a star actress of the company in just two years. As always, she’d still sometimes make blunders on stage, but after serving as the lead of Crazy ∞ nighT, she seemed to gain a lot of confidence in herself, and conspicuously improved her acting. Enough to make me feel like I couldn’t just sit around.

“Time to get going...”

“Yeah... Let’s do our best!”

Dusk had passed. The sky was dark and cloudless. The wind was strong, blowing against the window, but no rain. A night with a beautiful moon. I took a deep breath, and reached for the heavy green room door that would lead to tonight's play.